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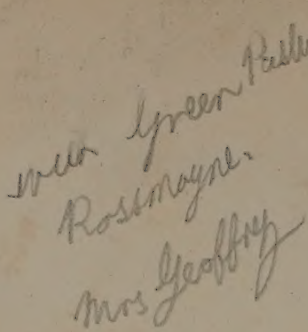

PORTIA;

OR,

"BY PASSIONS ROCKED."

A NOVEL.

BY THE

AUTHOR OF "MOLLY BAWN."

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1883.

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PORTIA;

OR, "BY PASSIONS ROCKED."

CHAPTER I.

"A child of our grandmother Eve, a female; or, for thy more sweet understanding, a woman."—LOVE'S LABOUR LOST.

THE gates are thrown wide open, and the carriage rolls smoothly down the long dark avenue, beneath the waving branches of the tall elms and the copper beeches, through which the dying sun is flinging its parting rays.

The horses, sniffing the air of home, fling up their heads and make still greater haste, until presently, rounding the curve, they draw up before the halldoor.

It stands open, and on the high, stone steps that lead to it, a very pretty girl looks down upon the carriage from under her palm, with a face eager and expectant. When she has barely glanced at it, she says "Ah!" in a tone of deep satisfaction, and

running down the steps, and over the gravel, turns the handle of the carriage door and looks anxiously at its occupant.

"You have come," she says, cheerily, "I was *so* afraid something might have prevented you."

The person she addresses — a girl about two years older than herself—says:

"Yes, I have come," in a tone slow and sweet, almost to languor.

"*So* glad," says the pretty girl, with a smile that must be one of her sweetest charms, it is so full of life and gaiety: "come out of this dreadful old sarcophagus and upstairs with me; I have your tea in your own room for you."

Miss Vibart, stepping out of the brougham, follows her hostess into the house, through the grand old hall, and up the wide, oak staircase, into a room huge and old-fashioned — but delicious and cosy, and comfortable to the last degree.

Having cast one hasty glance round the apartment, Miss Vibart turns to her young hostess—

"You are Dulcinea? isn't it?" she says, questioningly.

"Yes, I am Dulcinea as a rule—(may I be your maid, just for once—you will be so much happier without your hat)—but I have so many other names, that it takes me all my time to remember which one

I really belong to. Uncle Christopher calls me Baby! and Mark Gore, when he is here, calls me Duchess, and Dicky Browne calls me Tom, and Roger calls me—I really quite forget what it is Roger calls me," with a slight shrug of her shoulders.

"Is Dicky Browne your *fiancé?*" asks Miss Vibart, uncertainly; "I know you are engaged to somebody; Auntie Maud told me that."

"Dicky Browne! Oh no!" Then with the gayest little laugh in the world, "If you could only *see* Dicky Browne! He couldn't, by any possibility, be *anybody's fiancé!* You mean Roger, I suppose." But with a quick frown, and a touch of petulance, "Don't let us talk about *him*. He is such a worry, and has been making himself so exceedingly unpleasant all the morning!"

Miss Vibart stares, forgetting her usually very charming manners, for the moment, and then drops her heavily-fringed lids over her eyes.

"By-the-bye," says Dulce, breaking in upon what threatens to be an awkward pause, "how d'ye do? I don't believe I have said that yet." Her whole tone and expression have changed as if by magic, the suggestion of ill-temper is gone, the former vivacity re-asserts itself. She lays her hands upon her visitor's shoulders with a light, caressing gesture, and leans towards her. "I shall give you a little

kiss for your welcome, my dear cousin, if I may," she says, very prettily.

Portia Vibart, acknowledging her grace, tells herself this new cousin will suit very well, and returns her soft embrace with some warmth. She is feeling tired, used up, *ennuyé* to the last degree; even the two or three weeks she has had in town have been too much for her, and she has come down to her uncle's house nearly ready to confess to herself that she is seriously ill. Here, in the stillness, in this great room, with the elms swaying to and fro outside her windows, and the distant cawing of the rooks in the branches high up out of sight, she feels rest, and comfort, and a curious longing, that has a strange pleasure in it, to stretch out her arms and sigh deeply and contentedly.

"Sit in this chair, and rest a little before thinking of taking off anything else," says Dulce; "I shall pour out your tea."

She goes, with the quick undulating step that belongs to her, to a small, round table, and makes a little fuss over the delicate fat little cups that stand on the tray.

"You take sugar?" she asks, in a moment or two.

"No, thank you," says Portia, slowly; she is looking at her cousin still, whose hair is as nearly red as it can be, without being exactly so; it comes very,

very close to it, but it is only the rude who have ever called it so.

"But of course not," says Dulcinea. "One might know that by looking at you. It isn't a good thing to take sugar in one's tea now-a-days, is it?—it almost touches on immorality;" she is standing with the sugar-tongs poised in her right hand, and is glancing at Portia over her shoulder. "*I* take it, you know—any amount of it, but I have yet the grace to be ashamed of myself afresh, at every new lump. Dicky Browne likes it, too."

"Who *is* Dicky Browne?" demands Portia, suddenly: if she is going to live in this rather mixed household, she had better learn some particulars about the inhabitants at once.

"Not know Dicky? it argues yourself unknown. He is our celebrity. He is really immensely clever, about always doing the wrong thing, and indeed is inestimable in most ways. He is your cousin, too, as much as he is mine, which really," declares she, airily—"isn't much. But he is such a pet all through, that we magnify the third-cousinship into a first. He rides very straight, and smokes the very prettiest cigarettes, and he is *such* a fool!"

Miss Vibart is amused. "What a very charming description," she says, with the low laugh she allows herself; "he sounds like something I have seen

somewhere, and he certainly would be a treasure to Byron."

"Lord Byron?" asks Dulce, with lifted brows—"I don't myself think he would show off much as a Conrad, or a Giaour, or a Lara."

"I rather fancy I was thinking of the man who writes plays," says Miss Vibart, mildly. "Is he here now?"

"Yes. He spends most of his time here. Both he and Roger are consumed with a desire to see you. You must know," says Dulcinea, laughing over her cups at her cousin, "that a breath from the outer world came to us, whispering of your success in town, and how every one raves of your *beaux yeux*, and your beauty generally."

"Who wafted so insane a breath as that?" asks Portia, with a suppressed smile.

"Mark Gore. He puts in a good deal of his time here, too."

"Mark Gore never talks anything but the very utterest nonsense," says Portia, with a faint blush. "No one minds him. I shall be quite afraid to go downstairs to present myself to Dicky Browne after all you have said. Consider his disappointment!"

"I shan't," says Dulce, calmly, "and you needn't fear him. He is only Dicky. Well, it is five now, and we dine at seven. I shall send your maid to

you, and I shall call back for you in an hour, if you wish, to bring you downstairs with me. But, perhaps——"

"Oh! please do," says Portia, graciously. "I shall be just a little strange at first, shan't I?"

"Strange here? *Indeed* no," says Dulcinea, earnestly. "Nobody knows the meaning of that word in this old Court. We all get friends with each other at once, and I don't think we ever fall asunder again. Now at six do try to be ready, and I will take you to see Uncle Christopher, who is sure to be in just then."

"I shall be ready," says Portia, with determination.

CHAPTER II.

"The first and the simplest emotion which we discover in the human mind is curiosity."—BURKE.

"YES, I am quite ready," says Portia.

The hour has flown; and Dulcinea, standing in the doorway of her cousin's room, gazes on her with undisguised admiration. To Dulcinea anything lovely, be it man, or beast, or flower, is an intense and everlasting delight, and now Portia enchants her. In very truth so well she might, as a fairer picture than she presents at this moment can hardly be imagined.

She is standing before a large glass, let into the wall on one side of the room from ceiling to floor, and, with a back glass in her hand, is leaning slightly to one side, as though lost in admiration of the soft mass of fair, brown hair that lies coiled low down on her neck in high-art fashion. She is like a soft harmony in black and gold, with her filmy robes clinging closely round her, and the old gold, that is so like tarnished yellow, touching her here and there.

"Ah! Mark was right," says Dulce, with a little sigh of intensest pleasure: "come down now—(you *cannot* make yourself more beautiful)—and be made known to Uncle Christopher."

It is in the library that Miss Vibart makes herself known. Dulce entering first, with her gay little air, says—

"This is Portia, Uncle Christopher." Thereupon a tall old man, rising from a chair, comes quickly up to them and takes Portia's hand, and, stooping very low, presses his lips to her forehead.

He is a remarkably handsome old man, with light hair, and a rather warm complexion, and choleric, but kindly eyes. Even at the first glance Portia tells herself he would be as harsh a foe as he would be a champion true, and in so far she reads him aright. He is hot-tempered, obstinate, at moments perhaps unjust, but at all times kind-hearted, and deserving of tenderest regard.

Now he is holding his new niece's hand, and is gazing down at her with animated eyes, that no age will ever quite dim.

"So glad. *So* glad you have come to us," he says, in a tone that reminds her of Dulce's, though it is so deep and strong and masculine, and hers so very much the reverse in every way. "Bless me, how days go by! Just last week, as it seems

to me, I saw you a little girl in short petticoats and frills, and furbelows, and now—"

"I wear petticoats still," says Portia, demurely, with a soft laugh, "and frills sometimes, and often furbelows, I *think*, though I don't in the least know what they mean, but they sound nice. So, after all, I should be now very much as I was."

"Very much. But forgive me," says Sir Christopher, "if I say you were not anything like as good-looking then as you are to-day."

"A speech easy to forgive," says Portia, lightly. Then after a pause, "I, too, remember what *you* were like in those old days."

"What then?" asks Sir Christopher, giving a sudden pull to his collar, and betraying an increased degree of interest.

"Nothing like so good-looking as you are to-day," retorts she, with a quick smile and a little flicker of her eyelids.

"Ah! we shall be friends," cries Sir Christopher, gaily. "Baby and you and I will ride rough-shod over all the others; and we have wanted somebody to help us, haven't we, Baby?" Then he turns more entirely to Dulce; "Eh, a sharp wit, isn't it?" he says.

"Auntie Maud sent her love to you," says Portia.

"Eh? Much obliged, I'm sure," says Sir Chris-

topher. "Very good of her; mine to her in return. A most estimable woman she always was, if short of nose. How she *could* have thrown herself away upon that little insignificant—eh?—though he *was* my brother—eh?"—

"She ought to have had you," says Miss Vibart, with soft audacity.

"Eh? eh?" says Sir Christopher, plainly delighted. "Now, what a rogue!" He turns to Dulce, as he always does on every occasion, be it sweet or bitter. "You hear her, Dulce. She flatters me, eh?"

"Uncle Christopher, you are a sad, sad flirt," says Dulce, patting his cheek. "I am glad poor Auntie Maud escaped your fascinations. You would have forgotten her in a week. Do you know what o'clock it is?—*after* six. Now do go up and get ready for dinner, and try to be in time for once if only to do honour to Portia. He is so irregular," says Dulcinea, turning to Portia.

Miss Vibart, like Alice, begins to think it all "curiouser and curiouser;" yet, withal, the house seems full of love.

"Well, indeed, as a rule, I believe I *am* late," says Sir Christopher, in a resigned tone. "But I always put it down upon Mylder; he *can't* tie a cravat!" Then, to Portia, "You are pale and thin,

child. You must get rosy and fat, and above all things healthy, before we are done with you."

"She must, indeed," says Dulce, "though I doubt if she will thank us for it by-and-bye; when she finds herself (as she shall) with rose-coloured cheeks like a dairy-maid, she will be very angry with us all."

"I shall never have red cheeks," says Portia; "and I shall never be angry with you; but I shall surely get strong in this charming air."

"Here you will live for ever," says Dulce. "People at ninety-five consider themselves in the prime of life."

"Lucky they!" says Portia; "they must 'wear the rose of youth' upon them for ever."

"Oh! we *can* die young," says Dulce, hastily, as though anxious to take a stigma off her country-side. "We have been known to do it, but not much; and the happiest have gone the soonest."

"Yes," says Uncle Christopher, most cheerfully —he is plainly unimpressed, and shows an inclination to whistle

> "Golden lads and girls, all must,
> As chimney-sweepers come to dust!"

"I say, Dulce, isn't Portia like that picture of your grand-aunt in the north gallery?"

"Like who?" asks Portia, anxiously.

"Like the handsomest woman in Europe, of her time," says Sir Christopher, earnestly, with a low, profound bow that might perhaps have been acceptable to "the handsomest woman in Europe," but only serves now to raise wild mirth in the breasts of her degenerate grand-nieces.

When they have reached again the hall outside (leaving Sir Christopher to seek the tender mercies of Mylder) Portia turns to her cousin—

"I am fortunate," she says, in her usual composed fashion that is yet neither cold nor repellant, "I find Uncle Christopher also altogether charming!"

The "also" is very happy. It is not to be misunderstood, and is full of subtle flattery. Dulcinea yields to it, and turns, eyes and lips bright with a warm smile, upon Miss Vibart—

"Yes; he is quite everything that is nice," she says, gracefully ignoring the compliment to herself. "Now, shall we come and sit on the balcony until dinner is ready; as a rule, we assemble there in summer instead of in the drawing-room, which, of course, is more convenient, and decidedly more gloomy."

"I have an all-conquering curiosity to know everything about everybody down here," says Portia,

as they reach the balcony. Dulce pushes a low, sleepy-looking chair towards her, and, sinking gracefully into it, she turns her eyes up to her cousin. "Tell me all about your Roger," she says, languidly. "As I must begin with somebody, I think I shall prefer beginning with—with—what shall I call him? Your young man?"

"It sounds like Martha's baker's boy," says Dulce, laughing; "but you may call Roger what you like. I wish with all my heart you could call him husband, as that would take him out of *my* way."

They are standing on the balcony, and are looking towards the south. Beyond them stretch the lawns, green and sloping; from below, the breath of the sleeping flowers comes up to greet them; through the trees in the far, far distance comes to them a glimpse of the great ocean as it lies calm and silent, almost to melancholy, but for the soft lap, lapping of the waves upon the pebbly shore.

"Some one told me he was very handsome," says Portia, at a venture. Perhaps she *has* heard this, perhaps she hasn't. It even seems to her there is more truth in the "has" than in the "hasn't."

"I have seen uglier people," admits Dulcinea, regretfully; "when he has his face washed, and his hair brushed, he isn't half a bad boy."

"Boy?" asks Portia, doubtfully; to her the foregoing speech is full of difficulty.

"I daresay *you* would call him a man," says Dulce, with a shrug of her soft shoulders; "but really he isn't. If you had grown up with him, as I have, you would never think of him as being anything but an overgrown baby, and a very cross one. That is the worst of being brought up with a person, and being told one is to marry him by-and-bye. It rather takes the gilt off him, I think," says Dulce with a small smile.

"But why must you marry him?" asks Portia, opening her large black fan in an indolent fashion, and waving it to and fro.

The sun retiring

"On waves of glory, like an ocean-god,"

flings over her a pale, pink halo, that renders even more delicately fine the beauty of her complexion. A passing breeze flings into her lap a few rose-leaves from a trailing tree that has climbed the balcony, and is now nodding drowsily as the day slowly dies. She is feeling a little sorry for Dulce, who is reciting her family history with such a doleful air.

"Well I needn't, you know," says that young lady, lightly; "not if I don't choose, you know. I

have got until I am twenty-one to think about it, and I am only eighteen now. I daresay I shall cry-off at the last moment; indeed, I am sure I shall," with a wilful shake of the head, "because Roger, at times, is quite too much, and utterly insupportable; yet, in that case, I shall vex Uncle Christopher, and I do so love Uncle Christopher!"

"But he had nothing to do with the arrangement, had he?"

"Nothing. It was his brother, Uncle Humphrey, who made the mistake. He left the property between us on condition we married each other. Whichever of us, at twenty-one, declines to carry out the agreement, gets £500 a-year off the property, and the rest goes to the happy rejected. It is a charming place, about six miles from this, all lakes and trees, and the most enchanting gardens. I daresay Roger would be *delighted* if I would give him up, but" (vindictively) "I *shan't*. He shall never get those delicious gardens all to himself."

"What an eccentric will," says Portia.

"Well, hardly that. The place is very large, and requires money to keep it up. If he had divided the income between us, and we had been at liberty to go each our own way, the possessor of the house and lands would not have had enough money to keep it in proper order. I think it rather

a just will. I wish it had been differently arranged, of course, but it can't be helped now."

"Is he your first cousin? You know I have heard very little about this branch of my family, having lived so long in India."

"No, my second cousin. Fabian is Uncle Christopher's heir, but if—if he died, Roger would inherit title and all. That is another reason why I hate him. Why should he have even a distant claim to anything that belongs to Fabian?"

"But, my dear girl, you are not going to marry a man you hate?" says Portia, sitting up very straight, and forgetting to wave her fan.

"Not exactly," says Dulce, meditatively; "I really don't think I hate him, but he can be disagreeable, I promise you."

"But if you marry him, hardly tolerating him, and afterwards you meet somebody you can love, how will it be with you then?"

"Oh, I shan't do that," she says; "I have felt so married to Roger for years, that it would be positively indecent of me, even *now*, to fall in love with any one. In fact I couldn't."

"I daresay, after all, you like him well enough," says Miss Vibart, with her low, soft laugh. "Mark Gore says you are exactly suited to each other."

"Mark Gore is a confirmed old bachelor, and knows nothing," says Dulce, contemptuously.

"Yet once, they say, he was hopelessly in love with Phyllis Carrington."

"So he was. It was quite a romance, and he was the hero."

"Phyllis is quite everything she ought to be, and utterly sweet," says Portia, thoughtfully. "But *is* she the sort of person to create a *grande passion* in a man like Mark?"

"I daresay. Her eyes are lovely: so babyish, yet so full of latent coquetry. A man of the world, like Mark, would like that sort of thing. But it is all over now, quite a worn-out tale. He visits there at stated times, and she has thoughts only for her baby and her 'Duke,' as she calls her husband."

"I wonder," says Miss Vibart, with a faint yawn, "if at times she doesn't find that a trifle slow?"

Then she grows a little ashamed of herself, as she catches Dulce's quick, puzzled glance.

"It is a very pretty baby," says Dulce, as though anxious to explain matters.

"And what can be more adorable than a pretty baby?" responds her cousin, with a charming smile. "Now do tell me"—quickly, and as though to change the current of her companion's thoughts—"how many people are in this house, and who they

are, and everything that is bad and good about them."

Dulce laughs.

"We come and go," she says. "It would be hard to arrange us. *I* am always here, and Uncle Christopher, and—Fabian. Roger calls this his home, too, but sometimes he goes away for awhile, and Dicky's room is always kept for him. We are all cousins pretty nearly, and there is one peculiarity—I mean, Uncle Christopher makes no one welcome who does not believe—in—Fabian."

Her voice falls slightly as she makes the last remark, and she turns her head aside, and, leaning over the balcony, plays absently with a rosebud that is growing within her reach. In this position she cannot see that Portia has coloured warmly, and is watching her with some curiosity.

"You must try to like Fabian," says Dulce, presently. Her voice is sad, but quite composed. She appears mournful, but not disconcerted. "You have no doubt heard his unfortunate story from Auntie Maud, and—*you* believe in him, don't you?" She raises her eyes to her cousin's face.

"I hardly think I have quite heard the story," says Miss Vibart, evasively.

"No? It is a very sad one, and quite unaccountable. If you have heard anything about it,

you have heard all I can tell you. Nothing has ever been explained; I am afraid now nothing ever will be. It rests as it did at the beginning—that is the pity of it—but you shall hear."

"Not if it distresses you," says Portia, gently. A feeling of utter pity for Fabian's sister, with all her faith and trust so full upon her at this moment, touches her keenly. As for the story itself, she has heard it a score of times, with variations, from Auntie Maud. But then, when brought to bay, what *can* one say?

"It will not distress me," says Dulce, earnestly; "and I would so much rather you knew everything before you meet him. It will make things smoother. It all happened four long years ago—years that to him must seem a lifetime. He is twenty-nine now, he was only twenty-five then, just the time I suppose when life should be sweetest."

"It is mere accident makes life sweet at times," says Portia. "It has nothing to do with years, or place, or beauty. But tell me about your brother."

"He had just come home for his leave. He was so handsome, and so happy—without a care on earth—and was such a pet with the men in his regiment. I was only a child then, but he never seemed too old to talk to me, or to make me his companion. And then one morning it all happened; we were at

breakfast—as we might be to-morrow"—says poor Dulce, with a comprehensive gesture, "when one of the men came in and said somebody wanted to speak to Uncle Christopher. When I think of it"—with a long-drawn sigh—"my blood seems to run cold. And even now, whenever Harley comes in at breakfast and bends over Uncle Christopher in a confidential way to tell him—it may be—about the puppies or the last filly, a sensation of faintness creeps over me."

"I don't wonder," says Portia, feelingly. "How could one ever forget it? You are making yourself unhappy; go no farther now, but tell me about it another time."

"As I have begun I shall finish," says Dulce, heroically, "even at the risk of boring you. But"—wistfully—"you will forgive me that."

"Go on; I *want* to hear," says Portia, strangely moved. Yet it seems cruel to make her repeat what she knows so well already, and what is so bitter to the narrator.

"Well, Uncle Christopher went out to see the man who wanted him, and after a little bit came back again, with a white face, and told us one of the clerks at the County Bank had dared to say Fabian had forged his—Uncle Christopher's—name for £500. I think I hardly understood; but Fabian

got up, and first he grew very red, and then very white, but he said nothing. He only motioned to me not to stir, so I sat quite still, and then he went up to Uncle Christopher—who was very angry—and laid his hand upon his arm and led him out of the room."

She pauses.

"Dulcinea," as yet the more familiar appellation —"Dulce"—is strange to Miss Vibart. "Dulcinea," she says, very sweetly, holding out a soft, pale, jewelled hand, with tender meaning, "come and sit here beside me."

Dulce is grateful for the unspoken sympathy, but instead of accepting half the lounging chair, which is of a goodly size, she sits down upon a cushion at Portia's feet, and leans her auburn head against her knee.

"It was quite true that somebody had forged Uncle Christopher's name for £500, but who it was has never transpired. Uncle Christopher wanted to hush it up, but Fabian would not let him. The writing was certainly Fabian's, I mean the imitation was exactly like it. I saw it myself; it was so like Fabian's that no one could possibly know one from the other. You see"—wistfully—"I am terribly honest, am I not? I do not pretend to see a necessary flaw."

"I like you the better for that," says Portia; in-

voluntarily she lays her hand on Dulcinea's throat just under her chin, and presses her gently towards her. "If it will make you happier tell me the rest," she says.

"Unfortunately at that time Fabian *did* want money. Not much you know, but the fact that he wanted it at all was fatal. He had lost something over the Grand National—or one of those horrid races—and people heard of it; and then, even after long waiting and strictest enquiry, we could not discover who had been the real offender, and that was worst of all. It seemed to lay the crime for ever upon Fabian's shoulders. He nearly went mad at that time, and we, who loved him, could do nothing to comfort him."

"Ah! that was hard," says Portia, leaning over her. "Not to be able to lift the burden from those whose life is dear to us as our own, is almost more than one can bear!"

"How you understand," says Dulce, gratefully. "And then, you see, somehow everyone got to know about it; Fabian could not prove his innocence, and —I suppose—the story sounded badly in alien ears. And then there came a day when somebody—Lord Ardley I think—cut Fabian publicly, and that made an end of all things. Uncle Christopher wanted to take notice of that, too—wanted I think" (with a

wan little smile that has no mirth in it) "to challenge Lord Ardley and carry him over to France and fight it out with him *à la mort*, but Fabian would not allow it, and I think he was right."

"Quite right." There is a curious ring in Miss Vibart's tone as she says this, but Dulce is too occupied with sad retrospect to notice anything at this moment. "How could the writing have so exactly resembled Fabian's?" she says, presently; "it was Uncle Christopher's name was forged, was it not?"

"Yes, but Fabian writes exactly like him. He makes his capitals quite the same. Anyone trying to copy Uncle Christopher's writing would probably succeed in imitating Fabian's perfectly."

"Ah! he writes like Uncle Christopher," says Portia, slowly, as though adding another link in her own mind to a conclusion already carefully formed.

"You will like him, I think," says Dulce, getting up from her low position as though restless and desirous of change. She leans her back against the balcony and faces her cousin. "Though he is terribly altered; so different to what he used to be. He is so grave now, and silent and moody. He seems to be ever brooding over the mystery of his own life, and trying—trying to get away from everybody. Oh! how he suffered, how we all suffered just then, knowing him to be innocent."

"You knew he was innocent?" says Miss Vibart. Unfortunately her tone is one of inquiry. She has her hands clasped in her lap and is looking steadily at Dulce, who is watching her intently from the railings of the balcony, where she stands framed in by roses. Miss Vibart's fan has slipped to the ground; she is really deeply interested in this story. May not the hero of it prove an absorbing study? Her tone, however, grates upon the ears of the "absorbing study's" sister. Dulce flushes perceptibly; opens her lips hastily as though to speak, and then suppresses herself.

"I forgot," she says, quietly, after a moment's reflection, "you have never seen him."

The faith in this small remark touches Portia keenly—the more in that she has already formed her own opinion on the subject in hand.

"I wonder he stayed here after it happened," she says, with some faint acceleration of manner. Haste, to Portia, is a word unknown.

"He is a hero, a martyr," says Dulce, earnestly, two large tears gathering in her eyes. He was in the K.D.Gs., as you know, but of course he flung up his commission then, and was going abroad, when Uncle Christopher fell ill. So ill, that we despaired of him. And when even the doctor from London refused him hope, he called Fabian to his bedside

and made him swear he would not leave him while he lived;—and then he recovered. But he has always held Fabian to his word; and, indeed, it was a very necessary promise, because I don't think Uncle Christopher could live without him now. It is all terribly sad; 'but it would be worse if Fabian were really in fault, would it not?"

"It is all very sad," says Portia. Her eyes are bent, and she is slowly turning a ring round and round upon her finger.

"It has ruined Fabian's life, and broken his heart," says Dulce, in a low tone. "It is more than sad."

"But if innocent, why should it weigh so heavily upon him?" asks Portia, gently.

"*If*," says Dulce, quickly, the hot blood mounting to her cheeks. Then—very coldly—"There is no 'if' about it; he *is* innocent. However mysterious his unhappy story may sound in a strang——in your ears, nevertheless, our Fabian has nothing to do with disgrace. It could not touch him."

"I put it badly," says Portia, correcting her mistake with much grace. "I should have said *as* he is innocent. Forgive me."

"It was all a mistake," says Dulce, who is now very pale. "But we are so unaccustomed to even the faintest doubt of Fabian. Even Mark Gore, the

sceptic, believes in him. How tired you look; would you like another cushion to your back?"

"No, thank you. I am quite comfortable, and quite happy. Do you know,"—with a slow, lovely smile—"I rather mean that last conventional phrase; I *am* happy; I feel at rest. I know I shall feel no want here in this delicious old place—with you!" This is prettily toned, and Dulce smiles again. "I am so tired of town and its ways."

"You will miss your season, however," says Dulce, regretfully—for *her*.

"Yes, *isn't* that a comfort?" says her cousin, with a devout sigh of deepest thankfulness.

"A comfort!"

"Yes. I am not strong enough to go about much, and Auntie Maud has that sort of thing on the brain. She is like the brook, she goes on for ever, nothing stops her. Ah! See now, for example, who are those coming across the lawn? Is one your brother?"

"No! It is only Dicky Browne and——"

"Your Roger?"

"Oh! yes; my Roger," repeats Dulce, with a distasteful shrug.

Then she leans over the balcony, and says—

"Roger, come up here directly; for once in your life you are wanted by somebody. And you are to come too, Dicky, and please put on your Sunday manners, both you boys, because I am going to introduce you to Portia!"

CHAPTER III.

"Whether youth can be imputed to any man as a reproach, I will not, sir, assume the province of determining."—W. PITT.

THE boys, as Miss Blount—that is Dulce—irreverently terms them, are coming slowly across the grass, trampling the patient daisies. The sun has "dropped down" and the "day is dead," and twilight, coming up, is covering all the land. A sort of subtle sadness lies on everything, *except* "the boys," they are evidently full of the enjoyment of some joke, and are gay with smiles.

Mr. Browne is especially glad, which convinces his pretty cousin on the balcony that he has been the perpetrator of the "good thing" just recorded. At her voice both he and his companion start, and Roger, raising his eyes, meets hers.

He is a tall, slight young man, handsome, indolent, with dark eyes, and a dark moustache, and a very expressive mouth.

Dicky is distinctly different, and perhaps more difficult of description. If I say he is a little short, and a little stout, and a little—a *very* little—good

looking, will you understand him? At least he is beaming with *bonhomie*, and that goes a long way with most people.

He seems now rather taken by Dulce's speech, and says:

"No! Has she really come?" in a loud voice, that is cheery and comfortable to the last degree. He can't see Portia, as she is sitting down, and is quite hidden from view by the trailing roses. "Is she 'all your fancy painted her?' is she 'lovely and divine?'" goes on Mr. Browne, gaily, as though seeking information.

"Beauties are always over-rated," says Roger, sententiously, in an even louder voice—indeed, at the very top of his strong young lungs—"just tell somebody that somebody else thinks so-and-so fit to pose as a Venus, and the thing is done, and so-and-so becomes a beauty on the spot! I say, Dulce, I bet you anything she is as ordinary as you please, from the crown of her head to the sole of her foot!"

"I can't follow up that bet," says Dulce, who has changed her position so as effectually to conceal Portia from view, and who is evidently deriving intense joy from the situation, "because I have only seen her face and her hands; and they—to say the least—are passable!"

"Passable! I told you so!" says Roger, turning to Dicky Browne, with fine disgust. "Is she æsthetic?"

"No."

"Fast?" asks Dicky, anxiously.

"No."

"Stupid—dull—impossible?"

"No, no, no."

"I thank my stars," says Dicky Browne, devoutly.

"Can't you describe her?" asks Roger, impatiently staring up from the sward beneath at Dulce's charming, wicked little face.

"She has two eyes, and a very remarkable nose," says Miss Blount, with a nod.

"Celestial or Roman?" demands Roger, lazily. By this time he and Dicky are mounting the stone steps of the balcony, and discovery is imminent.

"I think it is a little unfair," murmurs Portia, in a low whisper, who is, however, consumed with laughter.

At this moment they reach the balcony, and Dulce says, blandly, *à propos* of Roger's last remark, "Perhaps if you ask her that question, *as she is here*, she will answer you herself!"

She waves her hand towards Portia. Portia rises and comes a step forward, all her soft draperies making a soft *frou-frou* upon the stone flooring; and

then there is a good deal of consternation! and a *tableau* generally!

"I'm sure I beg your pardon," says Roger, when breath returns to him, casting an annihilating glance at Dulce, who catches it deftly, plays with it for a moment, and then flings it carelessly over the balcony into the rising mist and night.

"Whatever you beg you shall have," says Portia, coming nearer to him and holding out a slim, white hand. "How d'ye do, Roger?"

"It is quite too good of you to forgive me so soon," says that young man, pressing with deep gratitude the slim, friendly hand. "It was beastly mean of Dulce, she *might* have told us"—this with another glance, meant to wither, at that mischievous maiden, who rather revels in her guilt. "My only apology is that I didn't know you—had never seen you, or I could not so have expressed myself."

"What a clever apology," murmurs Portia. "And what flattering emphasis!" She smiles at him pleasantly through the fast gathering gloom: "you will now introduce me to your friend, will you not?"

"Dicky come forward and make your best bow," says Dulce. Whereupon Mr. Browne, with a shamefaced laugh, comes to the front, and, standing before Miss Vibart like a criminal at the bar of justice, bends very low.

"Miss Vibart—Mr. Browne," says Roger, seriously. But at this Dicky forgets himself, and throws dignity to the winds.

"She called *you* Roger! I'm as much her cousin as ever you were!" he says, indignantly. "*Mr.* Browne, indeed!"

At this, both girls laugh merrily, and so, after a bit, does Dicky himself, to whose soul the mildest mirth is an everlasting joy.

"I am then to call you Dicky?" asks Portia, smiling, and lifting her eyes as though half-reluctantly to his; she has quite entered into the spirit of the thing.

"If you will be so very good," says Dicky Browne.

"You really had better," says Dulce, "because you are likely to see a good deal of him, and perpetually addressing people by their proper names *is* so tiring."

"It is true," says Portia; then turning to Dicky Browne, with half-closed lids and a subdued smile, she says, slowly:

"I am very pleased to make your acquaintance."

It has its charm, this lowered tone. Dicky gives in to it; and—metaphorically speaking—instantly prostrates himself at Miss Vibart's feet.

Perhaps he might have done so actually without

metaphor, Dicky's conduct being at times uncertain, but for a timely interruption.

"Any chance of dinner to-night?" says a cheery old voice behind them, and turning, they see Sir Christopher standing inside the open window of the drawing-room, smiling upon them with the utmost benignity. "Portia, my dear," he says, genially, as though he and she have been intimate for years, "we are all so young here, we hardly require sustenance. Nevertheless, let me take you into the dining-room, if only to see what cook has provided for us."

Portia lays her hand upon his arm and, followed by the others (who are plainly quarrelling in a warm, if subdued fashion), goes into the grand old dining-room. Roger takes the foot of the table; Dicky seats himself next Portia; Dulce, as she always does when no foreign guests are present, or as she terms it, on "off-days," seats herself near Uncle Christopher.

One place, however, is empty; by right it is Roger's; who, except when Fabian is absent, never sits at the foot of the table.

Sir Christopher fusses a little, grows discontented, and finally says uneasily—

"Where is Fabian?"

"He has a headache, dear," says Dulce, gently.

"He hopes we will all excuse him—especially Portia."

She turns with a sweet glance to Portia, who murmurs something civil in return.

"He would be better here than moping in his own room," says Sir Christopher, in a low voice. His spirits are evidently damped, though he makes an effort to suppress the fact; his smile grows faded, and less frequent, and presently dies away altogether. Every one makes a noble effort at conversation, and everyone, after a bit, breaks down ignominiously and looks at his or her fish, as though in it lies some hidden charm.

Dicky Browne alone remains unimpressed by the gloom of the surroundings. He is thinking the filleted sole very good indeed, and is lost to all other ideas.

"Tell you who I saw to-day," he says, airily, "Boer. That clergyman fellow, you know, who married that annoying girl who used to be always at Chetwoode. I spent half-an-hour with him in the High Street, just opposite the club."

"How you *must* have enjoyed yourself!" says Roger, feelingly. "How I wish I could have put myself in your place at that moment."

"Don't you! Not being selfish, I would willingly have resigned to you the intellectual treat I

endured! All things have their end, however, even my patience, which is known to be elastic like my conscience, so, as a last resource, I offered him a brandy and soda, and, as it turned out, it was quite the best thing I could have done under the circumstances. He looked awfully angry, and went away directly."

"Clever boy!" says Roger. "For the future I shall know exactly what to do when the reverend Boer inflicts his small talk on *me*. Dead sell, though, if he accepted your offer. One would have to sit it out with him, and, probably, he takes his brandy slowly."

"I don't believe he ever took any in his life," says Dulce, idly. "That is why the chill has never been removed from him. How I wish he could be thawed."

"I always feel so sorry for Florence," says Portia, languidly; she is feeling very tired, and is hardly eating anything. From time to time she looks at Sir Christopher, and wonders vaguely if it is her presence has kept Fabian from dinner to-night. "But Mr. Boer reads very well."

"When he doesn't turn over two pages at once," says Dicky Browne. "That is a favourite amusement of his, and it rather makes a mess of the meaning contained in holy writ. He is rather

touchy about that last little *fiasco* of his when reading before the bishop the other day, so I thought I would tell him a story to-day that chimed in deliciously with his own little mistake, and, I doubt not, brought it fresh to his mind."

"What a wicked humour you must have been in?" says Portia; "tell the story to us now."

"You have heard it, I daresay; I only repeated it to Boer in the fond hope he would go away if I did, but it failed me. It was about the fellow who was reading the morning lesson—and he came to the words, 'and he took unto him a wife'—then he turned over two pages by mistake, and went on—'and he pitched her with pitch within and without!' I don't think Boer liked my little story, but still he wouldn't go away."

"He is a dreadfully prosy person, and very material," says Portia, when they have all laughed a little.

"He is a jolly nuisance," says Mr. Browne.

"He hasn't got much soul, if you mean that," says Roger—

> "'A primrose by a river's brim,
> A yellow primrose is to him
> And it is nothing more.'"

"That *is* such utter nonsense," says Dulce, tilting

her pretty nose and casting a slighting glance at her *fiancé* from eyes that are

> "The greenest of things blue,
> The bluest of things gray."

"What more *would* it be?—a hollyhock, perhaps? or a rhododendron, eh?"

"Anything you like," says Roger, calmly, which rather finishes the discussion.

The night belongs to warm, lovable June; all the windows are wide open; the perfume of flowers comes to them from the gardens beneath, that are flooded with yellow moonshine. So still it is, so calm, that one can almost hear the love-song the languid breeze is whispering to the swaying boughs.

Across the table come the dreamy sighs of night, and sink into Portia's heart, as she sits silent, pleased, listening to all around, yet a little grieved in that her host is strangely silent, too, and looks as one might who is striving to hear the sound of a distant footstep, that comes not ever.

"He is always that way when Fabian absents himself," says Dicky Browne, with so little preface that Portia starts. "He adores the ground he walks on, and all that sort of thing. Speak to him and get him out of it."

"What shall I say?" asks Miss Vibart, somewhat taken aback. "Moods are so difficult."

"Anything likely to please him."

"My difficulty just lies there," says Portia.

"Then *do* something, if you can't say it. Exertion, I know, is unpleasant, especially in June, but one must sacrifice oneself sometimes," says Dicky Browne. "He'll be awfully bad presently if he isn't brought up pretty short by somebody during the next minute or so."

"But what can I do?" says Portia, who is rather impressed by Mr. Browne's earnestness.

"You hate Port, don't you?" asked he, mysteriously.

"Yes. But what has that got to do with it?"

"Take some presently. It is poison, and will make you dreadfully ill, but that don't count when duty calls. We all hate it, but he likes it and will feel positively benevolent if you will only say you like it too. 'Pride in his *Port*, defiance in his eye!'—that line, I am convinced was written for him alone, but modern readers have put a false construction upon it."

"It will make me *so* unhappy," says Portia, looking at Uncle Christopher with a pitying eye. The pity is for him, not for herself, as Dicky foolishly imagines.

"Don't think about that," he says, valiantly. "Petty inconveniences sink into nothingness when love points the way. Take your Port, and try to look as if you liked it, and always remember, 'Virtue is its own reward!' "

"A very poor one, as a rule," says Portia.

"Have some strawberries, Portia?" asks Roger at this moment, who has been sparring with Dulce, mildly, but firmly, all this time.

"Thank you," says Portia.

"They don't go well with Port, and Portia adores Port," says Mr. Browne, hospitably, smiling blandly at her as he speaks.

She returns his smile with one of deep reproach.

"Eh? No, do you really?" asks Sir Christopher, waking as if by magic from his distasteful reverie. "Then, my dear, I can recommend this. Very old. Very fruity. Just what your poor father used to like."

"Yes—your *poor* father," says Dicky Browne *sotto voce*, feelingly, and in a tone rich with delicate encouragement.

"Thank you. Half a glass please. I—I never take more," says Portia, hastily, but sweetly, to Sir Christopher, who is bent on giving her a goodly share of what he believes to be her heart's desire.

Then she drinks it to please him, and smiles faintly behind her fan, and tells herself Dicky Browne is the very oddest boy she has ever met in her life, and amusing, if a little troublesome.

Sir Christopher once roused, chatters on ceaselessly about the old days when he and Charles Vibart, her father, were boys together, and before pretty Clara Blount fell in love with Vibart and married him. And Portia listens dreamily, and gazing through the open window lets part of the music of the scene outside sink into his ancient tales, and feels a great longing rise within her to get up and go out into the mystic moonbeams, and bathe her tired hands and forehead in their cool rays.

Dulce and Roger are, as usual, quarrelling in a deadly, if carefully-subdued fashion. Dicky Browne, as usual too, is eating anything and everything that comes within his reach, and is apparently supremely happy. At this moment Portia's longing having mastered her, she turns to Dulce and asks softly—

"What is that faint streak of white I see out there, through, and beyond, the branches?"

"Our lake," says Dulce, half turning her head in its direction.

"Our pond," says Roger, calmly.

"Our *lake*," repeats Dulcinea firmly; at which

Portia, feeling war to be once more imminent, says hastily —

"It looks quite lovely from this—so faint, so silvery."

"It shows charmingly when the moon is up, through that tangled mass of roses, far down there," says Dulce, with a gesture towards the tangle.

"I should like to go to it," says Portia, with unusual animation.

"So you shall, to-morrow."

"The moon will not be there to-morrow. I want to go now."

"Then so you shall," says Dulce, rising; "have you had enough strawberries? Yes. Will you not finish your wine? No. Come with me, then, and the boys may follow us when they can *tear* themselves away from their claret!" This, with a scornful glance at Roger, who returns it generously.

"I shall find it very easy to tear myself away *to-night*," he says, bent on revenge, and smiling tenderly at Portia.

"So!" says Dulce, with a shrug and a light laugh that reduces his attempt at scorn to a puerile effort unworthy of notice; "a compliment to *you*, Portia; and—the other thing to me. We thank you Roger. Come." She lays her hand on Portia's and draws her towards the window. Passing by Uncle

Christopher's chair she lets her fingers fall upon his shoulder and wander across it, so as just to touch his neck, with a caressing movement. Then she steps out on to the verandah, followed by Portia, and both girls running down the stone steps are soon lost to sight amongst the flowers.

CHAPTER IV.

"'Tis not mine to forget. Yet can I not
Remember what I would or what were well.
Memory plays tyrant with me, by a wand
I cannot master!"

G. MELLEN.

PAST the roses, past the fragrant mignonette they go, the moon's soft radiance rendering still more fair the whiteness of their rounded arms.

The dew lies heavy on leaf and flower. Motionless stand the roses, and the drooping lilies, and the pansies, purple and yellow. "God Almighty," says Bacon, "first planted a garden; and indeed it is the purest of human pleasures; it is the greatest refreshment to the spirits of man!"

Here now, in this particular garden, where all is so deeply tranquil, it seems as if life itself is at a stand-still, and sin and suffering, joy and ambition, are alike unknown. A "pure pleasure" it is indeed to gaze upon it, and a great refreshment to any soul tired, or overwrought, or sorrowful.

The stars are coming out slowly one by one,

studding brilliantly the pale, blue vault of heaven, while from a

> "Thin fleecy cloud,
> Like a fair virgin veil'd, the moon looks out
> With such serene and sweet benignity
> That night unknits his gloomy brows and smiles."

Dulce, plucking some pale blossom, lifts it to her lips, and kisses it lightly. Portia, drawing a deep breath of intensest satisfaction, stands quite still, and letting her clasped hands fall loosely before her, contemplates the perfect scene, in mute delight.

Presently, however, she shivers, a passing breeze has cast a chill upon her.

"Ah! you are cold," says Dulce anxiously; "how thoughtless I am; yes, you are quite pale."

"Am I?" says Portia. "It was the standing here, I fancy. India gave me bad habits, that, after three years, I find myself unable to conquer. Every silly little wind strikes a chill to my heart."

"I shall get you a shawl in no time," says Dulcinea; "but keep walking up and down while I am away, so as to keep your blood warm."

"Your command shall be obeyed," says Portia, smiling, and then Dulce, turning, disappears quickly amongst the shadows, moving as swiftly as her light young feet can carry her.

Portia, left alone, prepares to keep her promise,

and walks slowly along the gravelled path once more. Turning a corner, again a glimpse of the distant lake comes to her. It is entrancing; calm as sleep, and pure as the moon above, whose image lies upon its breast.

Even as she looks the image fades—the "fleecy cloud" (jealous, perhaps, of the beauty of the divine Artemis, and of Portia's open admiration of her) has floated over her again, and driven her, for a little moment, into positive obscurity.

The path grows dark, the lake loses its colour. Portia, with a sigh, moves on, confessing to herself the mutability of all things, and, pushing aside some low-lying branches of a heavily-scented shrub, finds herself face to face with a tall young man, who, apparently, is as lost in wonder at her appearance as she is at his!

She starts, perceptibly, and, only half-suppressing a faint exclamation of fear, shrinks backwards.

"I beg your pardon," says the stranger, hastily. "I am afraid I have frightened you. But, really, it was all the fault of the moon."

His voice is reassuring, and Portia, drawing her breath more freely, feels just a little ashamed of her momentary terror.

"I am not frightened now," she says, with an upward glance, trying to read, through the darkness,

the face of him she addresses. The clouds are scurrying swiftly across the sky, and now the moon shines forth again triumphant, and all things grow clearer. She can see that he is tall, dark, handsome, with a strange expression round his mouth that is surely more acquired than natural, as it does not suit his other features at all, and may be termed hard and reckless, and almost defiant. His jaw is exquisitively turned. In his eyes is a settled melancholy—altogether, his face betrays strong emotions severely repressed, and is half-morbid and wholly sad, and, when all is said, more attractive than forbidding.

Portia, gazing at him with interest, tells herself that years of mental suffering could alone have produced the hard lines round the lips and the weariness in the eyes. She has no time for further speculation, however, and goes on quickly: "It was more than foolish of me; but I quite forgot, I"—with some uncertainty—"should have remembered."

"What did you forget? and what should you have remembered?"

"I forgot that burglars do not, as a rule, I suppose, go about in evening clothes; and I should have remembered"—with a smile—"that there was yet another cousin to whom I had not been introduced."

"Yes; I am Fabian Blount," he says, indifferently. He does not return her smile. Almost he gives her the impression that at this moment he would gladly have substituted another name for his own.

"Ah! you are Fabian," she says, half-puzzled by his manner.

"If you will take my word for it." His tone is even more strange as he says this, and now he *does* smile, but disagreeably.

Portia colours faintly.

"You have not asked me my name?" she says, quietly. "I am Portia."

"What a very pretty name!" He has had a half-smoked cigar behind his back all this time; now remembering it, he looks at it, and flings it far from him. "It reminds one of many things; Shakespeare, I suppose, principally. I hope," looking at her, "*you* will choose the right casket."

"Thank you. That is a very kindly wish."

"How does it happen that you are here all alone?"

"I was cold; I always am. Dulcinea saw me shiver, I think, and ran to get a shawl or some covering for me. That is all."

"She is a long time getting it, is she not?"

"Is she?" says Portia. This speech of his piques her a little. "Does it seem long?"

"Very long, if one is to shiver all the time," replies he, calmly, reading her resentment in her face, but taking no notice of it. "Much too long to be out in this chilly night-air without sufficient clothing, and with a wholesome dread of possible burglars full upon you. May I stay with you till Dulce returns, and will you walk on a little? It is foolish to stand still."

"I am sorry you threw away your cigar on my account. I am sure you want it now."

"I don't believe I ever want anything," says Fabian, slowly; and then they walk on again, returning by the way she had come. The night-wallflower is flinging its perfume abroad, the seringas are making sweet the air, a light eager wind rushes softly past them.

"It was a long drive," says Fabian, presently, with all the air of a man who is determined to rouse himself—however against his will—and carry on conversation of some sort. "Are you tired?"

"It *was* long. But everything here is so new, so fresh, so sweet, that I have forgotten to be tired."

"You are one of those perhaps, who always find variety charming." As he speaks, he carefully removes a drooping branch of roses out of her way.

"Not quite always." She smiles as she defends herself. "I like old friends, and old songs best. I

am not absolutely fickle. But I have always had a great desire to live in the country."

"People who have never tried it, always do have that desire."

"You think I shall be *désillusionnée* in a week? But I shall not. When George had to return to India, I was so unhappy in the thought that perhaps I should have to live in town until his return. Of course, I could have gone somewhere to live by myself, and could have found some charming old lady to take care of me, but I am not fond of my own society, and I can't bear charming old ladies."

"One feels quite sorry for the old ladies," says Fabian, absently.

"I was afraid I should have to put in my two years of waiting for George, with Auntie Maud, and that would have been terrible. It would mean seasons, and months at fashionable watering-places, which would be only town out of town—the same thing all over again. I was so glad when Uncle Christopher wrote to say he would like me to come here. I have often wondered since," she says, suddenly—smiling somewhat wistfully, and flushing a warm crimson,—"whether all of *you* didn't look upon my coming with disfavour."

"What put such a thought as that into your head?"

"A very natural one I think. A stranger coming to a household always makes such a difference; and you had never met me, and you might not like me, and——. Did any of you resent my coming?"

"No," says Fabian. There is no energy in his reply, yet it is impossible to doubt that he means exactly what he says. "You must not begin by thinking unkindly of us," he goes on, gently. "You may believe me when I say none of us felt anything but pleasure at the idea of your coming."

"Yes? That was very good of you all." She is longing to say, "Yet you see I kept you from dinner to-night," but after a moment's reflection leaves it unsaid.

"I hope the country will not disappoint you," he says, after a slight pause. "It is unwise to begin by expecting too much."

"How can it disappoint?" says Portia, with some intensity. She says nothing more, but she lifts her lovely face to the starry sky, and puts out her hands with a faint gesture, fraught with admiration, towards the heavy flowers, the distant lake, the statues half-hidden by the drooping shrubs, and the moonlight sleeping upon all!

"There is always in the country the sun, the flowers, and at night the moon," she says.

"Yet, the day will come, even for you, when there will be no sun, and when the moon will refuse to give its light." He speaks peculiarly and as though his thoughts are wandering far from her to other scenes in which she holds no part.

"Still, there will always be the flowers," she says, quickly, impressed by his tone, and with a strange anxiety to prove to herself, that surely all things are not in vain.

"Oh, no! They are the frailest of the three," returns he; "they are like our dearest hopes. At the very time they should prove true, when the cold winter of our discontent is full upon us, they forsake us—never to return?"

"Never? Does not the summer bring them again?" She has stopped in the middle of the path, and is asking her question with an anxiety that astonishes even herself. "This rosebush," she says, pointing to one close beside her, "now rich in glory, and warm with golden wealth, will it not bloom again next year, in spite of the death that must pass over it?"

"It may. But you will never see again those roses over there, that you love, and rejoice in now! Others may be like them, but they cannot be quite the same."

Portia makes no reply. The moonlight is full upon him, and she can see that his lips have lost

their hardness, and are as full of melancholy as his eyes. She is looking curiously at him, regarding him perhaps in the light of a study,—he is looking, not at her at all, but at something that surely has no place in this quiet garden, lying so calm and peaceful beneath the light of heaven.

A terrible expression, that is despair and grief commingled, covers his face. Some past horror, that has yet power to sting, is holding him captive. He has forgotten Portia, the beauty of the night, everything! He is wrapt in some miserable memory that will not be laid. Surely, "the heart may break, yet brokenly live on."

Be he guilty (as she believes him) of this crime that has darkened his life, or only the victim of unhappy circumstances, at this moment Portia pities him with all her heart.

Voices in the distance! Roger and Dulce still high in argument; a faint perfume of cigarettes; Dicky Browne's irresistible laugh; and then they all come round the corner, and somebody says, "Ah, here she is," and Dicky Browne places a shawl round Portia's shoulders.

"You here, Fabian?" says Dulce, gladly. "And making friends with Portia? That's right."

"Taking a mean advantage of us all I call it," says Dicky Browne. "*We* got introduced in the cruel

glare of day, with all our imperfections on our heads. *You* waited for moonshine, balmy air, scent of roses, poetical effect, and so on! That's why you stayed away from dinner. And to think none of us saw through you! Well, I always said I was very innocent; quite unfit to go about alone!"

"Not a doubt of it," says Roger, cheerfully. "But you won't have to complain of that long. We are all on the look-out for a keeper for you, and a straight waistcoat." Then, turning to Fabian, "Your headache better, old man?"

"Thank you—yes. Your cousin is tired, I think, Dulce. Take her in and make her rest herself."

"Ah! You are worn out," says Dulce to Portia, with contrition. "I have been so long getting you the shawl; but I could not help it. You must not stay up, you know, to do manners to us, you must go straight to bed this moment, and come down like a rose in the morning. Now confess you are tired."

"Well, yes, I am afraid I am," says Portia, who is feeling faintly disappointed for the first time since her arrival. Why, she scarcely knows.

"She said 'I am a-weary, a-weary; I would I were a-bed,'" quotes Mr. Browne, feelingly. Whereupon everyone feels it his duty to take Portia at once back

to the house, lest Mr. Browne, by any ill-luck, should commit himself still further.

It is only when Portia is at last alone in her own room that she recollects that Fabian forgot to shake hands with her. Or was it she with Fabian?

CHAPTER V.

"Oh, how full of briars is this working-day world."
AS YOU LIKE IT.

"I WISH you would *try* to remember," says Dulce, a little hastily. She is sitting in a rather Gothic chair, and the day is ultra-hot, and the strain upon her mental powers is greater than she can bear. Hence the haste!

She is leaning back in the uneasy chair now, pencil in hand, and is looking up at Roger—who is leaning over the table—in a somewhat supercilious manner, and is plainly giving him to understand that she thinks him a very stupid person indeed.

This is irritating, and Roger naturally resents it. A few puckers show themselves upon his forehead, and he turns over a page or two of the gardener's book before him with a movement suggestive of impatience.

"I *am* trying," he says, shortly.

"Well, you needn't tear the book in pieces," says Dulce, severely.

"I'm not tearing anything," retorts Mr. Dare, indignantly.

"You look as if you wanted to," says Dulce.

"I don't want anything except to be let alone," says Mr. Dare.

The windows are all wide open. They were flung wide an hour ago, in the fond hope that some passing breeze might enter through them. But no breeze cometh—is not, indeed, born—and the windows yawn for it in vain. Outside, all Nature seems asleep; inside, the very curtains are motionless.

In a low rocking-chair, clad in the very lightest of garments permitted by civilisation, sits Sir Mark Gore. He arrived at the Court only yesterday, in a perfect torrent of passionate rain, and was accused on all sides of having brought ill weather in his train. But to-day having asserted itself, and dawned fairly, and later on having burst into matchless beauty, and heat of the most intense, he is enabled to turn the tables upon his accusers, who look small and rather crushed.

"Have they had such a day this season?"

"Never! Oh, never!"

"Have they ever seen so lovely a one?"

"Never—at least, *hardly* ever!"

They are vanquished. Whereupon he tells them

they were distinctly ungrateful yesterday, and that he will never put in a good word for them with the clerk of the weather again. *Never!*

Just now he is nodding drowsily over his *Times*, and is vainly trying to remember whether the last passage read was about Midhat Pasha, or that horrid railway murder, or the Irish Land League.

In the next window sits Portia, clad in a snowy gown that suits her to perfection. She has been here now for a fortnight, and feels as if she has been here for ever, and almost wonders if in reality she ever knew another home. She is lounging in the very easiest of cushioned chairs, and is making a base attempt at reading, which attempt is held up to public scorn every other minute by Dicky Browne, who is sitting at her feet.

He is half in and half out of the room. His feet being on the verandah, his head and shoulders in the room. He is talking a little, and fidgetting a little, and laughing a little, and, in fact, doing everything in the world except thinking a little. Thought and Dicky Browne are two.

The room in which they are all sitting is long and very handsome, with three windows and two fire-places. It is always called the blue room at the Court, for no earthly reason that any one can see, except that it is painted green—the very most

impossible green, calculated to create rapture in the breasts of Oscar and his fellows; a charming colour, too, soothing and calm and fashionable, which, of course, is everything. There are tiny cabinets everywhere, gay with majolica ware and many a Palissy dish; while Wedgewood and Derby and priceless Worcester shine out from every corner. There are eastern rugs, and Japanese screens, and, indeed, everything that isn't Japanese is old English, and everything that isn't old English is Japanese—except, perhaps, a few lounging-chairs of modern growth brought in to suit the requirements of such unæsthetic beings as prefer the comfortable satin-and-down lounge to the more correct, if more trying oak.

"Perhaps it was the Duke of Edinburgh," says Roger, breaking the silence that has lasted now for a full minute. "I see he is very handsome, of robust habit and constitution, and of enormous size and length. Is that what you want?"

"No; I am sure it was not the Duke of Edinburgh. It doesn't sound like him. I wonder why you can't think of it. I am sure if I once eat anything I should remember all about it."

"Good gracious!" says Dicky Browne, from his lowly seat, glancing solemnly at Portia, "have they eaten the Duke of Edinburgh? It sounds like it,

doesn't it? They must have done it on the sly. And *what* a meal! Considering they acknowledge him to be of enormous size and length!"

"Perhaps it was Sir Garnet Wolseley," says Roger, moodily, in the discontented tone of one who is following out a task utterly repugnant to his feelings. "He has an excellent flavour, but is entirely destitute of shank or shoulder."

Sir Mark Gore, at this dreadful speech, lowers his paper and lifts his head. Portia looks faintly startled. What can Roger be talking about?

"Ain't it awful," says Mr. Browne, "who'd have thought it of them. They *look* quite mild—and—er—like other people. Positively they are cannibals! And (did you remark?) it is *roast shoulder* they prefer, because they are grumbling at the want of it in the unfortunate general who has evidently been enticed from his home and coldly murdered by them. I wonder it wasn't in the papers—but doubtless the family hushed it up. And how heartlessly they speak! But, by the way, what on earth is a *shank?*——"

"The neck is splendid, and indeed there is no waste whatever," goes on Roger, in a wooden tone.

"No waist whatever! Did you hear that? I always thought poor Sir Garnet was a lean man,"

says Dicky, *sotto voce.* "Poor, poor fellow, can nothing satisfy them but rank and talent?"

"Not a bit like it," breaks in Dulce, petulantly tapping her foot upon the floor. She is never petulant with anyone but Roger, being indeed, by nature, the very incarnation of sweetness and light.

"Give it up," says Roger, rising hope in his tone,—hope that, alas, is never verified.

"And meet McIlray with such a lame story as that! Certainly not," says Dulce, warmly. "It *must* be found out. *Do* try again."

"Well, this must be it," says Roger, in despair, "The Marquis of Lorne, exquisite short neck, smooth skin, very straight, nice white spine."

At this Sir Mark rises to his feet.

"Really my *dear* Roger!" he says, impulsively—but for the excessive laziness of his disposition it would have been severely.

"Ah," says Roger, glad of anything in the shape of a reprieve, even though it be unpleasant argument.

"How *can* Dulcinea find any interest in the colour of the Marquis's spine?" says Sir Mark, reprovingly. "Forgive me if I say I think you are going a little too far."

"I shall have to go farther," says Roger, desperately. "There is no knowing where I shall end.

She can't find it out, and neither can I, and I see no hope of our arriving at anything except a lunatic asylum."

"I can look it up by myself," says Miss Blount, grandly. "I don't want your help—much. I daresay I can manage by myself after all. And even if I can't, I daresay Mark will come to my assistance if you forsake me."

"I won't," says Gore, decidedly, "I won't indeed. I would do anything in the world for you Dulcinea, as you know, but for this work unfortunately I am too modest. I *couldn't* go about making enquiries about the colour of people's spines. I couldn't, indeed. As a matter of science I daresay it would be interesting to know the exact number of shades, but —I feel I am unequal to the task."

"The Duke of Connaught," goes on Roger, wearily, hope being stifled in his breast, "bright green skin, well covered with bloom; small neck and——"

"Oh! hang it all, you know," says Dicky Browne, forgetting himself in the excitement of the moment, "I don't believe his Royal Highness *has* a green skin, do you, Portia?—saw him only a fortnight ago, and he looked all right then, just as white as the rest of us."

"It's cucumbers," says Miss Blount, with dignity.

"Yes, cucumbers," responds Mr. Dare, with a sigh; he is evidently in the last stage of exhaustion. "McIlray has forgotten the name of some particular seed he planted in the spring that we all liked immensely (how I wish we *hadn't*), and he has compelled Dulce to try and discover it. So we are looking for it in these infer—I mean these very prettily-illustrated books that the seedsman has kindly sent us (how I wish he hadn't), and hope to find it before the millennium. I daresay any time next month you will still find us here poring over these identical books, but we shall be *dead* then—there is at least comfort in that thought."

"One wouldn't think so, to look at you," says Gore, pleasantly.

"You can go away, Roger, you really can," says Dulce, irritably. "You are not the least use to me, and I hate grumblers."

"Perhaps it is the Empress of India," says Dicky Browne, who has come over to the table, driven by sheer curiosity, and is now leaning on Roger's shoulder. "She 'is of enormous length, and the handsomest this year. She is beautifully-shaped throughout, with scarcely any handle.' Oh, I say, hasn't the Queen a handle to her name? What an aspersion upon her royal dignity."

"Ah! here is Fabian! Now you may go away,

all of you," says Dulce, with fine contempt. "He will really be of some use to me. Fabian, what is the name of the cucumber that tiresome McIlray wants? I am worn out, almost in hysterics, trying to remember it."

"What a pity you didn't ask me sooner," says Fabian. "It is all right. I made it out this morning, and told McIlray. He says now he remembers all about it perfectly."

"Fabian, may I shake hands with you? You are a man and a brother," says Roger, effusively, with a sudden return of animation. "I should indeed like to kiss you, but it might betray undue exhilaration. You have saved me from worse than death. Bless me, isn't it warm?"

"Just a little sultry," says Mr. Browne. "Show me that book you are looking at! Carter's, eh? How I love a work of that sort! I think I love Carter himself. I daresay it is he designs those improbable vegetables and fruits that would make their fortunes as giants at a penny show. You see there *are* giants in these days."

"Are there?" says Dulce. "I think there aren't."

"Well, it's just as simple," says Dicky, amiably. "Not a bit more trouble. It is quite as easy to suppose there aren't, as to suppose there are. *I* don't mind. But to return to our muttons. I really do

esteem our Carter—in anticipation. It occurs to me he yet may grow peaches as big as my head, and then what a time we'll 'ave, eh?—Eating fruit is my forte," says Mr. Browne, with unction.

"So it is," says Dulce. "Nobody will dispute that point with you. You never leave us any worth speaking about. McIlray says you have eaten all the cherries, and that he can't even give us a decent dish for dinner."

"What vile alliteration," says Mr. Browne, unabashed. "Decent, dish, dinner. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"Well, I'm not," says Dulce.

"Just shows your moral depravity. If you aren't you ought to be. Three great big D's in a breath! Shocking, shocking," says Dicky, gravely.

"What a heavenly day, and how depressing. We are never satisfied," says Mark Gore, flinging his arms above his head with a lazy gesture, and looking with almost comic despair at the pale-blue-and-gold glory in the heavens above.

Fabian, who has been standing near him, lost in a day-dream, starts perceptibly at his tone, and moves as though he would go towards the door. Then, though still a little absent, and still wrapt in the dream from which he has sought to free himself, he looks round the room as though in search

of something. Perhaps he finds it as his eyes light upon the window where Portia sits, because they linger there, and the restless expression, that has characterised his face up to this, vanishes.

He hesitates; pushes a book upon a table near him backwards and forwards gently two or three times, as though in doubt, and then walks straight to the window where Portia is, and leans against the sash, just where he can see the lovely, downcast face before him.

After Dicky's defection (or was it on Fabian's entrance?) Miss Vibart returned to her neglected book, and has been buried in it ever since. Even when Fabian comes and stands close to her, she is so engrossed with the beauty of the story that she forgets to lift her eyes to look at him. So determinately do they seek the page beneath them, that Fabian tells himself she must indeed have got to a thrilling part of her tale.

Her long, dark lashes lie like shadows on her cheeks. Her lips are closed. The hand that lies beneath the book trembles slightly.

They are all laughing at the upper end of the room at one of Dicky's absurdities. Down here by the far window, there is a silence marked enough to make itself felt. I think at last even Mark Gore feels it, because he rises from his comfortable rock-

ing-chair with a faint yawn, and, walking down the room, comes to anchor behind Portia's chair.

Leaning over it he says, pleasantly:

"Is that book of James's so very charming as to make you deaf and blind to us poor mortals?"

"I am never deaf or blind to you," says Portia, sweetly, glancing up at him over her shoulder. Her rounded chin is slightly tilted, a soft smile curves her lips.

At the Court, Mark is a special favourite, yet so pretty a speech coming from Portia, who is usually so cold and indolent, strikes one as strange. Fabian regards her earnestly. How beautiful she is, yet how unsympathetic; has she no soul, no feeling? Surely her eyes, so large, so deep, so intense, belie this thought.

As though compelling himself, he says with a visible effort—

"Have you been indoors all this lovely day. Has the sun had no power to tempt you to come out?"

"No;"—she shakes her head as she answers him, and smiles, too, but the smile is cold as death, and though perfect, is altogether different from the one bestowed only a minute since upon Sir Mark.

"Then come out now," says Gore, as though pleasantly impressed by the suggestion conveyed in

Fabian's speech. "Let us all shake off dull sloth and make a tour right round the gardens."

"A charming idea," says Portia, sitting more upright, and brightening visibly. She grows even animated, and animation, even of the faintest, is to be commended on such a day as this.

"Take your cousin to see the new carp-pond," says Gore, addressing Fabian, but watching Portia attentively. "You will like to see it, Portia?"

"So *very* much," says Portia. "But if I do go, it must be with Dicky."

Her manner as she says this gives both the men fully to understand that early in the day she had pledged herself to go for a walk some time in the afternoon. So far, so good,—it *might* have so explained itself—but, unfortunately, at this moment Dicky Browne (who, as Dulce says, is always in the wrong place at the wrong time) comes up behind them, and addresses them generally:

"What are you all conspiring about?" he says, genially. "Roger and Dulce, for the fourteenth time to-day, have again agreed to differ, so I seek refuge here. Take me in, will you? And, by-the-bye, what shall we do with ourselves this grilling day?"

"I have just been suggesting a quiet stroll," says Sir Mark.

"The very thing!" exclaims Mr. Browne, who is

amiability itself. "Why on earth didn't we think of that before? Portia, if you will come with me, if you have not promised," with a glance at Sir Mark, "to go with anyone else, I will shew you a new tennis-court that will draw tears of admiration from your eyes."

This is the unfortunate part of it. It now becomes apparent to every one that Dicky did *not* ask her early in the morning to go for a walk anywhere. Silence follows Dicky's speech. A faint pink colour, delicate but distinct, creeps into Portia's cheeks; she does not lower her head, however, or her eyes either, but gazes steadily through the open window at the hills in the far, far distance, misty with heat and coming rain.

She feels that Fabian's eyes are on her, and inwardly resents his scrutiny. As for Fabian himself, his brow contracts, and a somewhat unpleasant expression mars the beauty of his face; yet, turning to Dicky with the utmost composure, he says, calmly—

"Take Portia to see the carp-pond; that may interest her."

"So I will," says Dicky. "But you come, too, old man; won't you? You understand all about fish, you know, and that, and I don't a little screw. Make him come, Portia; he talks like a book when he has got to explain things."

"Don't trouble Portia," says Fabian, quietly. "*Even she* could not persuade me to leave the house to-day, as I have business on hand that must be done."

There is the very faintest touch of sarcasm in his tone. The "even she," though very slightly done, is full of it. Portia, at least, is conscious of it. She unfurls her huge, black fan with a lazy gesture, and then turns her large eyes full upon him.

"So sorry my persuasions have failed," she says, slowly, not having persuaded him at all; and, satisfied with this speech, waves the fan indolently to and fro, and with half-closed lids watches the merry little sunbeams outside as they run hither and thither over the grass.

"Oh! let us do something," says Dulce, from the distance. "I shall go mad if I am left here to talk to Roger all day."

"I'm sure I don't want you to talk to me if it disagrees with you," says Roger, with ill-suppressed ire.

Then they tell her they are going for a gentle stroll before tea is ready, and she consents to go with them if Sir Mark will walk with her instead of Roger; and Roger, having indignantly disclaimed all anxiety to be her companion on this occasion, peace

is restored, and they all sally forth armed with big, white umbrellas, to inspect the stupid carp.

Fabian alone remains indoors to transact the mysterious business that I think would have been gladly laid aside had Portia so willed it. That she had absolutely refused to have him as her companion in her walk, was so evident at the time of her expressed desire to go to see the carp with Dicky Browne, that Fabian could not be blind to it. Standing in the window of the library now, with the dying sunset reddening the scene without, and shedding upon the flowers her tenderest tints of fair array, Fabian reminds himself of each word she had said, of each smallest smile and glance that had belonged to her, and at this moment hates her with a hatred that is exceptionally bitter.

Then a little wave flows over his soul, and he tells himself how that he is unjust, and a stranger cannot be reasonably expected to think him innocent of a crime he himself has been unable to refute.

The day wanes. Twilight falls; a flush of soft violet colour deepens the sky. The sound of footsteps echoes again in the long hall without; they have returned from the carp and the new tennis ground, and are asking eagerly for their tea. The sun has gone down behind the western hills, and

the stained-glass windows are throwing a sombre light over the antlers and Gothic chairs, and mediæval furniture, in which the halls delight. Fabian, hearing the footsteps, pulls himself together somewhat roughly, and, opening a door that leads to a passage in little use, makes his way to a distant office, where he tells himself, bitterly, he is "far from the madding crowd," and free from intrusion.

Dulce and Portia, crossing the hall, go down the north corridor that leads to the library Fabian has just vacated. A heavy crimson curtain conceals a door on one side, and, as they pass, a figure, emerging from behind it, brushes somewhat brusquely against Portia, filling her with sudden alarm.

This figure, as it appears in the vague gloaming, is bowed and bent, and altogether uncanny.

Portia, shrinking closer to Dulce, lays her hand upon her arm.

"Ah! what was that?" she says, fearfully.

"Only Gregory Slyme," returns Dulce, quickly; "you are not frightened at *him*, poor old thing, are you? Have you not seen him before?"

"No," says Portia, with a shudder and a backward glance at the shrunken figure creeping away down the corridor as if ashamed of itself.

"No?—that is strange; but he has affected his own room a good deal of late."

"But who is he?"—anxiously.

"He was Uncle Christopher's secretary for years, and calls himself that still, but Fabian does all the writing now."

"What a start he gave me," says Portia, putting her hand hurriedly to her heart as though in pain. "A chill seemed to rush all through my blood. It was as though I had met something that had worked, and would work, me harm!"

"Fanciful baby," says Dulce, with very superior scorn; "old Slyme could not work ill to anyone. He has lived with us for years; but lately, within the last months, he has become—well, a little uncomfortable; indeed, perhaps, unbearable is the word."

"How so?—what has he done?" asks Portia, unaccountably interested in this shadow that has crossed her path.

"I think he is very fond of brandy," says Dulce, reluctantly, and in a very grieved little tone. "Poor old Gregory!"

CHAPTER VI.

"Present mirth hath present laughter;
What's to come is still unsure."
SHAKESPEARE.

"JULIA is coming to-day," says Dulce, looking at them all, with the tea-pot in her hand. It is evident that this sudden announcement has hitherto been forgotten. "I heard from her this morning," she says, half apologetically, "but never thought of telling you until now. She will be here in time for dinner, and she is bringing the children with her."

"Only the children?" says Roger; the others are all singularly dumb.

"Yes. The *ayah* has gone home. Of course she will bring a nurse of some sort, but not Singa."

"For even small mercies we should be thankful," says Roger.

"Who is Julia?" asks Portia, idly.

"'Who is Julia! What is she
That all our swains commend her?
Holy, fair, and wise is she,
The heavens such grace——'"

"Oh, that will do," says Dicky Browne, turning impatiently to Roger, who has just delivered himself of the above stanza.

"Don't be severe," says Dulce, reprovingly; "extravagant praise is always false, and as to swains, that is what she *wants* them to do, only they won't."

"Now, who is severe?" says Roger, triumphantly.

"As yet, you have hardly described her," says Portia.

"Let me do it, entreats Mr. Browne, airily, "I feel in the very vein for that sort of thing. She is quite a thing to dream of; and she is much too preciously utter, and quite too awfully too-too!"

"That's obsolete now," says Dulce, "quite out of the market, altogether. Too-too has been superseded, you should tell Portia she is very-very!"

"Odious,"—says Roger, in a careful aside, as though determined to think Miss Blount's speech unfinished.

"She is like Barbauld's *Spring*," put in Sir Mark, lazily, coming up to have his cup refilled. "She is the 'sweet daughter of a rough and stormy sire.' Do any of you remember old Charley Blount."

Plainly, nobody does. Everybody looks at everybody else, as though *they* should have known him, but nothing comes of it.

"Well, he was just the funniest old thing," says

Sir Mark, laughing, at some absurd recollection. "Well, he is gone now, and

> 'I know it is a sin
> For me to sit and grin
> At him here;
> But the old three-cornered hat
> And the breeches, and all that,
> *Were* so queer."

"And bless me, what a temper he had," says Sir Mark, laughing again at his quotation. "His clothes and his temper were old Blount's principal features. Hideous old monster he was, too."

"Is she hideous?" asks Portia.

"N-o. She is well enough; she isn't a bit like him, if we forget the clothes and temper. She says her mother was very beautiful."

"I never knew a woman whose mother wasn't beautiful, once the mother was dead," says Roger. "Sort of thing they tell you the moment they get the chance."

Five o'clock has struck some time ago. Evening is coming on apace. On the dry, smooth-shaven lawn, outside, the shadows are lengthening, stretching themselves indolently as though weary from all the hide-and-seek they have been playing, since early dawn, in the nooks and corners of the quaint old garden.

June has not yet quite departed; its soft, fresh, glory still gilds the edge of the lake, and lends a deeper splendour to the golden firs that down below are nodding to the evening breeze; it is the happiest time of all the year, for

> "What is so rare as a day in June?
> Then, if ever, come perfect days;
> Then heaven tries the earth, if it be in tune,
> And over it softly her warm ear lays."

"Well, the mother is dead and gone now, this many a year," says Sir Mark, "and the old fellow went nearly out of his mind when Julia married Beaufort."

"Oh! she is married?" says Portia.

"Dear Portia, didn't I *tell* you she had children," says Dulce, reproachfully. "She married an Indian Nabob with an aristocratic name, and a *lac* of rupees, as she believed, but there was a flaw, somewhere, and—er—how was it Dicky?"

"Simplest thing out," says Dicky. "He had a lack of rupees, indeed, as she found out when he died. It is only the difference of one letter after all, and that can't count for much."

"Her father, old Charley, left her everything, so she isn't badly off now," says Sir Mark, "but the Nabob was a sell."

"I wonder if Portia will like her," says Dulce,

meditatively, laying her elbows on the table, and letting her chin sink into her palms.

"Tell me something about her personally," entreats Portia, turning to her with some show of interest.

"What can I tell you? She is pretty in her own way, and she agrees with everyone, and she never means a word she says; and, when she appears most earnest, that is the time not to believe in her; and she is very agreeable as a rule, and she is Fabian's pet aversion."

("Not now," says Portia to herself.)

"I don't think there is anything else I can tell you," continues Dulce, with a little nod.

"I wonder you have her," says Miss Vibart, disagreeably impressed by this description.

"Why, she is our cousin! And, of course, she can come whenever she wishes—she knows that," says Dulce. "It is not with her, as with you, you know. You are a joy, she is a duty. But the children *are* so sweet."

"How many of them?" asks Portia, who knows a few things she prefers to children.

"Three. Pussy, Jacky, and the Boodie. The Boodie is nothing short of perfection."

"That is the one solitary point on which Dulce and I agree," says Roger. "We both adore the

Boodie. Wait till you see her; she is all gold hair, and blue eyes, and creamy skin, and her nose is a fortune in itself. I can't think where Julia found her."

"Fabian is so fond of her," says Dulce, whose thoughts never wander very far from the brother for whose ruined life she grieves incessantly, day after day.

"How old is she?" asks Portia—"this little beauty you speak of—this harmony in blue and gold?"

"Five, I think. She is not in the least like her mother, who goes in for æsthetics, with a face like a French doll, and who will love you for ever, if you will only tell a lie, and say you think she resembles Ellen Terry."

"With a soul given entirely to French bonnets and Louis Quinze shoes, she would be thought ultra-mundane," says Sir Mark, who is trying to make Dulce's little toy terrier, Gilly, stand on his hind legs, in search of cake.

"My goodness! what a long word," says Dicky Browne, who is now eating bread and butter, because he has finished the cake. "Does it mean anything edible? Because if so I don't quite follow you; *no* one could masticate Julia!"

"I hope she will be in a good temper when she

comes," says Roger. "Last time she terrified us all into fits."

"If the children have behaved nicely in the train, and if anyone has taken any notice of her, she will be charming," says Dulce, moodily. "If not, she will be—the other thing."

"And the other thing isn't nice," puts in Dicky, in his pleasantest tone.

"Then what shall we do with her just at first?" says Miss Blount, who is evidently in fear of breakers ahead.

"Look here," says Mr. Browne, who couldn't hold his tongue to save his life, "I'll tell you the first thing to say to any fellow who arrives at your house. Don't go worrying him about the health of his sister, and his cousins, and his aunts, but just ask him if he will have a B. and S. He *will*, you know—and —and there you are. He won't forget it to you afterwards."

Sir Mark laughs. Portia unfurls her fan and smiles faintly behind it.

"Julia isn't a fellow, and I'm sure she wouldn't like brandy," says Dulce, who is feeling a little hopeless as she contemplates the coming of this new guest.

"The more fool she," says Dicky; "try Madeira,

then. She has a tenderness for Madeira—and tell her her hat is lovely. That'll fetch her."

"Come and sit here, Dicky," says Portia, motioning to the footstool near her. "Your advice is not to be surpassed."

"It's not so bad," says Mr. Browne, comfortably settling himself on the cushion at her feet, just as Fabian enters the room; "but I'm sorry she won't entertain the brandy idea. That never fails. It's friendly, homely, you know, and that."

"Dicky says if you drink rum and new milk every morning before breakfast, you will live for ever," says Dulce, thoughtfully.

"What a miserable idea," says Fabian, in his usual soft voice, that has yet something stern about it; "it suggests the Wandering Jew, and other horrors. Who would live for ever?"

"*I* would," says Dicky, with a sentimental glance at Portia, "if I might only remain here."

"Get up, Dicky, and don't make an ass of yourself," says Sir Mark, a little sharply for him, considering his natural laziness, and his tendency to let all things slide. As a rule he makes indolence his god, and sacrifices everything to it. Now, some superior influence compels him to make this speech, and to regard Dicky with a glance that bespeaks disfavour. Fabian is standing somewhat apart, his

eyes as usual fixed upon the flickering shadows and the touch of green in the ocean beyond, but with his mind many leagues away. Yet now he turns, and looks with wonder at Sir Mark, as though astonished at his tone, and Sir Mark looks at him. There is a certain amount of longing, and hope, and affection in Sir Mark's glance.

"At all events she will be in time for our ball," says Roger, "and, besides that, there will be another element of amusement. Stephen Gower is coming back to the Fens at last. She can get up a little flirtation with him, and as he is a right-down good sort, I daresay, if I gave him the right cue, he would take her off our hands for a little while."

"Is your friend coming?" says Dulce, with some surprise. "You never told us. And that pretty place is to have a master at last? I am rather glad, do you know; especially as he is a friend, too, of Fabian's."

"I have no friends," says Fabian, suddenly, with a small frown.

"Oh yes, you have, whether you like it or not," says Gore, quickly. "I can swear to one at least. My dear fellow, this is one of your bad days; come with me; a walk through the evening dews will restore you to reason once more."

He passes his arm through Fabian's, and leads

him down the balcony-steps into the dew-steeped gardens. A moan from the sea comes up to greet them as they go. No other sound disturbs the calm of the evening air.

"I think Fabian has the most perfect face I ever saw," says Roger, suddenly. But Portia makes no reply. She is watching Fabian's figure as it disappears in the dusk. Dulce, however, turns quickly, and looks at Roger, a strange gleam in her great, blue eyes.

CHAPTER VII.

"He is a fool who is not for love and beauty. I speak unto the young, for I am of them, and always shall be."—BAILEY.

SLOWLY, decorously, they march into church, one by one—Dulce first, and then Sir Christopher, and then Julia Beaufort and Portia, and so on, down to the children, who are evidently consumed with a desire to know more than seems, and who are evincing a dangerous longing to waltz up the smooth stone aisle.

The Boodie (who has not been overdrawn by Dulce and Roger, and who really *is* like an angel, with her sapphire eyes and corn-coloured hair, and the big white bonnet, with its blue bow, that surrounds her face like a cloud) rather loses her presence of mind. It is either this, or a sudden accession of ambition, that overcomes her, because, without a moment's notice, she turns gently on her left heel, and executes a tiny pirouette on her small hessian boots. A frown from her mother suppresses further evolutions, and, with a sigh, she returns to decorum and the family pew.

In a corner of it the children are comfortably stowed away, while all the others following suit, fall into their proper places. They are only barely in time. The organ plays them up the aisle, and they have only just a second to scramble through the preliminary prayers (so distinct a token of respectability), when the rector's voice breaks forth.

Portia, who has not been to church before, looks up at Mr. Grainger, while he is confessing every body in a tone severe but bilious, and tells herself he is as like a superannuated old crow as ever he can be. He is flanked by the curate, a mediæval young man, with a pallid countenance and an irreproachable gown, cut in the latest fashion, who stands in an attitude of the most approved, with his eyes fixed immovably upon a side pillar. The fixity of his gaze is so intense as to suggest the idea that he never again means to remove it until death claims him for his own.

Then a hymn is sung by the village choir, led by the organist's high soprano. It is a hymn very unique in its way, and sung with much fervour, if little tune, and pierces even to the brains of its hearers. The organ beats a solemn accompaniment to this delicacy, and whether the strains from the ancient instrument—that squeaks like a dilapidated bagpipe—is too much for the curate, I know not;

but, at the last verse, he removes his eyes from the pillar of the church and concentrates them upon Portia.

Portia, at this particular moment, I regret to say, is smiling broadly. A brilliant smile that illuminates her whole face, rendering her as lovely as a dream. She is plainly deriving great consolation from the village choir!

The curate, smitten by the sight of her levity, or by the consciousness of his own lapse from the path of duty, in so far letting his mind wander to mundane matters, turns pale, and, lowering his eyes until they reach the tesselated pavement at his feet, grows sad and thoughtful, and perhaps decides on eating no meat again to-day as punishment for his fault.

The church is old, quaint, curious. It is like a thing forgotten. It looks as if it had been dug up by somebody and planted just here, no one knows why. The windows are narrow and elongated, and admit but little light. The pillars in the more distant corners are wrapt in gloom. A cobweb falling from the roof, spun by some enterprising spider, hangs over the gaunt pulpit, as though desirous of coming in contact with whosoever may enter it.

This cobweb, as it waves lazily backwards and forwards with every breeze that assails it, is a thing

of joy to Roger and Dicky Browne, who are sitting side by side. It is an unspeakable boon, a sweet attraction, an everlasting resource to them throughout the service. As it goes to and fro their eyes follow it; they would willingly bet upon it were such a thing practicable; and they wait in a charmed suspense until such time as someone will enter the pulpit, to see whether the someone will attack the cobweb, or the cobweb attack the someone.

Besides the cobweb there is a clerk and a sexton. Sometimes they say Amen when the idea strikes them; sometimes they don't; it is awkward when they *don't*. Then a lull in the performance makes itself felt, though it is always somewhat broken by the voice of the curate, which is monotonous in the extreme.

A few stray sunbeams are straggling in through the narrow windows, and are holding high festival in Dulce's bonnet; a perfect crown of glory envelopes her head. The day being exceptionally warm, everything and everyone is drowsy and sleepy, and a trifle inattentive.

Meanwhile, the service progresses surely, if slowly. Uncle Christopher's head is courting his chest; Fabian, who always sits next to him, is unmistakably wide awake, but has his head lowered, and his eyes fixed moodily upon the carpet at his feet. He looks

attentive, but is really miles away from the commandments and from everything.

Portia, in her white gown, is looking more than ordinarily lovely, and just now is gazing oddly at Fabian. She is vaguely wondering how he would look if he permitted himself to smile. He is always so preternaturally grave that she is curious to know if a smile — once indulged in — would imbitter or sweeten his face. Yes; Roger was quite right when he said the other day that Fabian's face was perfect. Perhaps even the smile she desires to see upon it could not improve it. Nay, it might even mar it, so severe are its lines; but were they *always* so? She is lost in impossible speculation!

Dulce, clad all in severe black, with her hands crossed upon her knees, like a small devotee, is looking straight before her at nothing particular, and is utterly unconscious that the strange young man in the "Fens" pew is regarding her with an amount of attention he has certainly not expended on his prayers.

The children have behaved wonderfully well, all things considered. The Boodie has only once laughed out loud, and only twice have Jacky and Pussy indulged in a deadly scuffle; altogether, there is deep cause for thankfulness.

The cobweb is still waving to and fro, and now

(as Mr. Grainger ascends the stairs and enters the pulpit), driven perhaps by some stronger current of air, moves rapidly to the right, so that the rector reaches his place and arranges himself therein, without coming into collision with it, to Roger's and Dicky's everlasting chagrin.

"A narrow escape," says Dicky, in a careful undertone, to Roger, who, too, has been breathlessly watching the *dénouement.*

"Yes, just like our dismal luck," responds that young man, in an aggrieved tone. "I'd have bet anything on its catching him by the wig."

Mr. Grainger standing up, after a short and private prayer, looks as if he was making his bow to the audience, and having surveyed them leisurely for an embarrassing moment (during which the farmers' wives fidget, and look as if they would gladly inhabit their boots), he gives forth his text.

Silence ensues: the curate arranges himself in a purely ascetic attitude; the rector stamps his foot, in a preparatory sort of way, on the floor of the massive pulpit, which is as hideous as it is clumsy to the last degree. There are a few meagre little carvings all round it, suggestive of tares and wheat and good Samaritans, and there is an impossible donkey in the foreground. It is a very depressing pulpit, but certainly solid.

"No chance of a break-down," says Roger, gloomily, fixing his eye-glass in his left eye, and surveying with ill-concealed disgust the unwieldy structure before him.

"You're a brave boy," returns Mr. Browne, with exaggerated admiration. "Fancy your looking for excitement *here*."

"It may be nearer than you think," says Roger, *so* meaningly, that his companion applies himself to the translating of his glance. It is fixed; and fixed on the cobweb, too, which is slowly, slowly floating towards the rector's head. It comes nearer to it, catches in a rising lock (that has elevated itself, no doubt, because of the preacher's eloquence), and lingers there, as though bent on lifting pulpit, Grainger and all to the ceiling, with the next puff of wind.

Roger forgets his grievance, his *ennui*, everything! The situation has its charm! To his delight he finds Dicky as wrapt in the possible result as himself. The cobweb sticks fast. Mr. Grainger, lifting his hand, smooths his ear, under the mistaken impression that the tickling feeling is there, and then goes on solemnly with his discourse, which is dryer than the weather, which is saying a good deal. He moves his head impatiently from side to side, but gains nothing by this, as the cobweb is

apparently of an affectionate disposition, and goes with him wherever he listeth.

Dicky Browne is entranced. *Such* an interlude was more than he had hoped for. Involuntarily he lays his hand on Dulce's arm and, giving her a mild pinch, shows her the cause of his apparent joy.

"If the flooring gives way he'll die the death of Absalom," he says, gravely, whereupon Miss Blount also, I grieve to say, gives way to silent but wild mirth.

The rector waxes warm. The cobweb, giving up the hair as a bad job, has relinquished its hold, and is now mildly touching his cheek, in a somewhat coquettish fashion. Mr. Grainger, with a short but decisive gesture, drags it, and its many yards of spider-workmanship to the ground. The cobweb and the spider suffer—but they have their revenge. Mr. Grainger is embarrassed with the cobweb, which has twined itself lovingly round his finger, and not until he has lost his place in his sermon and grown very red in the face, is serenity restored.

The rural congregation show every symptom of being able to fall at a moment's notice in the arms of Morpheus. The curate grows leaner, more toil-worn, more ascetic. The rector drones away. The Boodie, having walked up and down the pew several times, has finally come to anchor in Uncle Chris-

topher's arms, and having flung her little white bonnet recklessly from her, has now snuggled her head inside his coat, and is intently listening to what appears to be a very lengthened whisper from him. It seems to be a whisper without an end, and one undesirous of response. Indeed, there is a legend extant that Uncle Christopher employs his time during the sermon, whenever the Boodie is with him, in telling her tales of fairyland, not to be surpassed by Grimm or Anderson!

The rector bleats on incessantly; faintly and more faintly his voice seems to reach his flock. The sun beats with undying fervour upon the gables outside and the bald heads of the parishioners within. There is a great sense of quiet everywhere, with only the rector's voice to disturb it, when suddenly upon the startled ear falls a sound, ambiguous, but distinct.

It is a snore! An undeniable snore! and it emanates from Jacky! He has succumbed to heat and Mr. Grainger, and is now travelling in lands where we poor waking mortals cannot enter. Apparently he is happy, but he certainly is not as pretty as he need be, with his short and somewhat aggressive nose uplifted, and his mouth at its widest stretch.

Everyone in the pew gives a decided jump—be

the same small or great—but Pussy alone finds herself equal to the occasion. She is a child of extreme promise, and, seeing her opportunity, at once embraces it. She seizes Jacky mildly but firmly by the hair, and administers to him three severe shocks.

The result is everything she can possibly have desired. Jacky awakening, comes to his senses with the aid of a partially suppressed yell, and falling upon Pussy with an evident desire to exterminate her there and then, rolls with her off the seat, and disappears with her heavily under it.

An awful moment, fraught with agony for the survivors ensues: and then the belligerents are once more brought to light by Fabian; who, after much search and expostulation, restores them to their proper places. Being nearest to them, he plants them again upon their cushions with only this precaution —that he himself now sits between them. This is hardly to their liking, and from their several positions, and right across poor Fabian's chest, they breathe fire and war, and death and destruction upon each other.

How it will all end everyone refuses to dwell upon; but, just at the most critical moment, Fabian, stooping his dark, grave face, whispers something to the irate little damsel that, as if by magic, reduces her to order.

She looks at him a little while, then sighs, and finally, slipping her hand through his arm, lays her blonde head against him, and is the personification of all things peaceful, until the service ends.

She looks up at him, too, as though desirous of his forgiveness, and Fabian, taking her slim, little baby hand in his, assures her with a glance that she *is* forgiven; and then she smiles at him, and nestles a degree closer, and then Fabian, though always unsmilingly, passes his arm round the child, and draws her into a more comfortable position.

Portia, who has watched it all, feels a strange pang at her heart; it is as though he is glad to be friends with these children, to be at peace with them, because they, at least (sweet, trusting souls), believe in him. And what a tenderness he betrays towards them! this dark, moody, concentrated man, whose whole life is burdened with an unsavoury mystery. What a power, too, he possesses over them; even that untractable Pussy was calmed, charmed into submission by a word, a glance. Yet children and dogs, they say, have keenest instincts!

While she still wonders, Fabian lifts his eyes and meets hers, and as though drawn by some magnetic influence each towards the other, though sorely against their wills, they gaze into each other's faces for more time than they care to calculate after-

wards, until at last Fabian (who is the first to recover himself) lets his glance fall, and so the spell is broken.

After this, Portia sits quiet and thoughtful until the last Amen is uttered, and they all go eagerly, but with a meritorious attempt at regret, into the open air once more.

CHAPTER VIII.

"None here are happy, but the very fool,
Or very wise: I am not fool enough
To smile in vanities, and hug a shadow;
Nor have I wisdom to elaborate
An artificial happiness from pains."

YOUNG.

THEY are all standing in the porch, saying "How d'ye do" to half-a-dozen of their neighbours, and being introduced to the dark young man in the Fens pew. He is a very handsome young man, and very light-hearted apparently, and looks very frequently at Miss Blount, who smiles at him very graciously, and tells him he must "really come up to luncheon at the court, or Uncle Christopher will be *so* disappointed. *Any* friend of Roger's"—and so on.

"Portia," says Sir Christopher, suddenly—when Stephen Gower has expressed his extreme pleasure at the thought of lunching at the Court, always with his dark eyes fixed curiously upon Dulce—"Come with me; I want to show you your poor mother's last resting-place."

"Ah! yes; I shall like to see that," says Portia,

tenderly, though the dead mother is only a bare memory to her. "Yes; take me to see it."

They separate from the others, and go round an angle of the old church, and past an ivied corner, and so come to the quiet spot where stands the vault of the Blounts.

"It was too far to send her to the Vibart's burying-place," says Sir Christopher; "at least, we tried to think so, because we wanted to keep her with *us*. And your father was dead. And at the very last, she murmured something about being laid beside her mother; poor, dear girl!" To Sir Christopher, Portia's mother has always been a girl, and a poor soul. I think, perhaps, Portia's father had been "*breezy*" in the way of temper.

Then Portia asks many questions, trivial in themselves, yet of mighty interest to these two, to whom the dead had been dear. And the questions and answers occupy some time, insomuch that when at length they return to the church porch, they find the others have all disappeared, and the sexton preparing to lock the church door.

"Where have all my people gone to?" asks Sir Christopher of this functionary, in a rather elevated tone, the functionary being, as he himself would describe it, "hard of hearing." Whereupon they are informed that the "Court folk" went "away home

through yon small iron gate," and into the woods beyond, and are now presumably sauntering lazily homewards beneath the shade of the spreading oaks and elms.

"Then we cannot do better than follow their example," says Sir Christopher, but almost before they come to the iron gate they see Fabian, who, unmindful of their presence, nay, rather, utterly unaware of it, walking steadily, but slowly, onwards, as though lost in thought.

Presently hearing footsteps behind him, he turns, and, seeing Portia, starts perceptibly and comes to a stand-still.

"I thought you would all be at home long before this," he says, involuntarily. Involuntarily also his tone conveys the idea that his wish was "father to his thought." There is a note in it that is distinct disappointment. Portia lets her lids fall over her eyes, and lets her lips form themselves into an almost imperceptible smile. Plainly he had loitered in the churchyard in the fond hope of avoiding them all (her especially it may be), and here is the result.

"We thought the same of you," says Sir Christopher, cheerily, coming to the front bravely, "we believed you at the Court before this. Very lucky you aren't, though, as I want you to see Portia home.

I must go and interview Bowles about that boy of his—a duty I hardly admire."

"It is late now. If you delay any longer you will miss your luncheon," says Portia, hurriedly. Her face betrays unmistakable anxiety.

It is now Fabian's turn to smile, but his lips are rigid, and the commonest observer may read, that mirth of even the grimmest description is far from him.

"Luncheon, eh? I don't care a fig about luncheon," says Uncle Christopher, gaily, "unless I'm shooting, or that. No. Better see Bowles now if I am to see him at all. Sunday is his only visible day I've been told. His '*At home*,' in fact—as all the rest of the week he lies in bed, and refuses to wash himself."

"Horrid man!" says Miss Vibart, merely for the sake of saying something. In reality had Bowles felt it his duty to lie a-bed all the year round, and never indulge in the simplest ablutions, it would not have given her a passing thought.

"On the Sabbath he rouses himself, and in a spotless shirt (washed by that idiot of a wife of his, who still will believe in him), and with a pipe in his mouth, he struts up and down the pavement before the door of his palatial residence," says Uncle Christopher. "I'm sure to find him to-day."

"Let me go with you," says Portia, as a last

resource. "I should like to be made acquainted with this incomparable Bowles." She smiles as she speaks, but the smile is somewhat artificial, and is plainly conjured up with difficulty for the occasion.

"Well, come," says Sir Christopher, who always says yes to every one, and who would encourage you warmly if you expressed a desire to seek death and the North Pole.

"It is quite impossible," says Fabian, quietly, not raising his voice, and not moving as he speaks. "Portia cannot go with you to Bowles's house. The man is insupportable."

Portia has her hand upon Sir Christopher's arm; her eyes are alight; something within her —some contradictory power—awakens a determination to see this Bowles. Yet it is hardly so keen a desire to see a man in a clean shirt and a "churchwarden" that possesses her, as a desire to circumvent the man who has opposed her expressed wish. Fabian, on his part, though pained, is equally determined that she shall not be brought face to face with the unpleasant Bowles. She has her eyes on him, but he has his on Sir Christopher.

"I should like to go with you," she says, in clear tones, taking no heed of Fabian's last remark;

"I like country people, and strange village characters, and—and that." This is somewhat vague.

"You remember the last time Dulce went to see *Mrs.* Bowles?" says Fabian, who has caught Sir Christopher's eye by this. Whatever Dulce may have endured during that memorable visit is unknown to Portia, but the recollection of it, as forced upon Sir Christopher's memory, is all-powerful to prevent her accompanying him on his mission today.

"Yes, yes. I remember," he says, hurriedly, "Bowles, as a rule, is not courteous. My dear child,"—to Portia,—"*No*, you cannot, I regret to say, come with me. This man can be uncomfortable in many ways. You understand, eh? You wouldn't like him. People in shirt-sleeves, however clean, are always out of it, eh? There, good-bye to both of you. Take her home, Fabian, and explain my absence to the others, especially to Roger's friend, that new young fellow, Gower, of the Fens."

So saying, he marched away to do battle with the objectionable Bowles, with his fine old shoulders well squared, and a world of defiance in his gait. There is no help for it! The two left behind feel this acutely, and Fabian pushing open the little iron gate, Portia goes down the stone steps and

enters presently upon a wood all green and soft and verdure-clad.

The trees are interlaced above their heads. Through them the calm, blue sky looks down in wonder, and sheds a scintillating radiance on their path.

"In heat the landscape quivering lies,
The cattle pant beneath the tree:"

No little kindly breath of air comes to break the monotony of the dead sultriness that lies on everything.

Portia sighs, and with a small, but expressive, gesture, pushes her hat somewhat farther off her forehead. He is quick to notice the faintest sign of wrong in those with whom he associates, and now turning to her says, gravely:

"Here, beneath the trees, where the sun cannot penetrate too severely, Dulce often takes off her hat. Take off yours."

"If you think it will do any good," says Portia, doubtfully; and as though fearful of seeming ungracious, she does take off her hat, and walks along beside him, bare-headed.

She is feeling sad and depressed. For the first time since her arrival she is wishing herself back again with Auntie Maud, who is anything but after her own taste. Yet to live on here in the shadow

of a living lie is bitter to her, more bitter than she had ever supposed possible.

She had come down to the Court fully aware that Fabian (according to the lights of those with whom she had lived) was guilty of the crime imputed to him. He had always been discussed in her immediate circle with bated breath, as one who had eternally disgraced the good old name of Blount, and dragged it cruelly in the dust.

To be innocent and not to be able to prove one's innocence, had seemed (and even now does seem to Auntie Maud and her set) a thing not to be entertained for a moment. It would be *too* preposterous! He had rendered their name hideous, but he should not impose upon them with his absurd stories of utter ignorance. They believed he had wilfully committed the forgery, trusting he would never be discovered, because of the unfortunate similarity between his writing and that of Sir Christopher. But he had failed, in spite of his ingenuity, and had been found out; and though none of the forged notes had been discovered in his possession (which only proved the more to his distant relatives that he possessed the cleverness of the practised schemer), still they one and all sat upon him in solemn conclave, and pronounced him outside the pale of respectability.

That Christopher should elect to leave the beautiful old Court to such a one seems little less than a crime to the "cousins and aunts." To leave it to a man shunned by the entire county (and very properly too!), a man ashamed to lift his head amongst his fellow men, and who had never tried to live down his disgrace or brave it out. In this fact—the certainty of his being pusillanimous about his accusation—lies the proof of his guilt to them.

Portia is going over the whole sad story now again, while the sinner walks beside her. Once she lifts her eyes, and looks at him, and tells herself Roger was indeed right when he made much of his beauty. Yet Satan dwells in comely bodies! How sad that a face so inclined to nobility should be stamped with the lines of care, born of dishonour. Tears fill her eyes as she looks at him, and she turns her head quickly away, but not before he has seen and marked the signs of distress within her beautiful eyes. A spasm crosses his face; he recoils a little from her, as though fear possesses him. He frowns; and a curious light—half grief, half anger—grows upon him, and expresses itself upon his quiet lips. Something that is almost agony is in his eyes; truly though the body can know grief, the "sorrows of the soul are graver still?"

"What is it that has risen between us?" he asks,

suddenly; there is something intense in his tone. "Have you?"—he pauses, and then goes on with an effort—"have you in your heart so utterly condemned me?"

They have come to a stand-still; and Fabian, as he asks this question, is standing with his back against a huge oak tree, his eyes fixed upon his companion. His face is as white as death.

She makes him no answer. A very fine shade of colour, so faint as to be almost imperceptible, dyes her cheek for a moment and then vanishes as suddenly as it came, leaving her quite as pallid as he is himself.

"It is the most natural thing in the world to condemn," he goes on, somewhat excitedly. "It is only human. One feels how easy it is. If one hears a damning story about an acquaintance, a story almost unsupported, how readily one inclines to the cruel side. It is not worse in one than in another. We all have a touch of savagery about us—a thirst for blood. For the most part, if placed in a certain set number of circumstances we all think and act alike. That we should be cast in one mould with the very commonest of our brethren, is a humiliating thought, but strictly within the lines of truth. You *do* condemn me?"

He wishes to force her into saying so. She

shrinks from him, and raises one hand to her throat, as though nervous and unhappy.

"I don't know," she says at last, in a low, hesitating tone. "I know nothing. Some times I don't even know myself."

"That is always a knowledge difficult of attainment," he says, slowly. "But about me, in your heart, you are *sure*. You believe you do know. You think me guilty." As he says the word he clenches one hand so firmly that the nails crush into the flesh.

"I would rather not talk about it," says Portia, faintly.

By a terrible effort he recovers himself; a quick breath, that is almost a sigh, escapes him.

"That, of course, shall be as you wish," he says, quietly; and, rousing himself, they walk on together beneath the branching elms, in silence, painful as it is prolonged.

Coming to a tiny stream (where he is compelled to offer, and she to accept, his hand to help her over), she glances at him, but her glance is not returned, and then she sees that he has forgotten her very existence, and is, in thought, miles away from her. He has entered into some ideal realm of his own—captured during his long years of isolation from the world.

As she is silently watching him and wondering, a dark figure, moving from between the shrubs that hide off one angle of the house, comes into their path, and, seeing them, makes a skulking movement to the right as though it would gladly escape observation.

"Good evening, Slyme," says Fabian, in a half kindly, half contemptuous tone. The old man murmurs something in return. His eyes refuse to meet Fabian's, his hands join each other, and rub palm to palm in an uneasy, shuffling fashion. His voice is husky, and slightly uncertain. His dull old eyes roam from Fabian to Portia in an odd, questioning way, as if debating some strange matter. Yet, though looking at them, it is at their arms or chests he looks, rather than at their faces.

Portia (who had stopped when Fabian had) now turns a little to one side and plucks a flower lazily from a neighbouring shrub, and sighs a little as if weary, and as if she would gladly be at home.

At this, Fabian, who is quick to notice anything concerning her, rouses himself from his prolonged stare at Gregory, and noting the instability of the old man's gait, says, suddenly, with his dark gaze full upon him—

"Again!"

His tone this time is all contempt, no kindliness

mingles with it. The old man seems to wither beneath it, and puts out his hands with a gesture suggestive of deprecation. Fabian, taking no notice of it, walks away from him, Portia gladly following.

Then the secretary's face changes. Standing in the centre of the pathway, he looks after their retreating figures with a half-drunken scrutiny, full of malice.

"Ah," he says bitterly, beneath his breath, "as a dog I am, in his sight! So he has destroyed his only hope this many a time!"

His head sinks into its old position on his chest, and with a muttered curse he continues his way.

Just as Portia ascends the stone steps that lead to the house, Fabian, by a gentle touch, detains her.

"Remember always this," he says slowly and with an attempt at calmness that is infinitely sad, "that I do not blame you."

Tears spring to her eyes. She is at least generous, and now a great longing to be able to believe in him, to be able to assure him of her unbounded faith in his honour possesses her. But, alas! faith is neither to be invoked or purchased, and to lie to him, and tell him a soothing falsehood against her conscience would be worse than useless. The tears having gathered, two of them roll slowly down her

cheeks. She turns hastily aside. Catching her hand he holds it for a short moment in his own.

"They at least are mine," he says, meaning the tears, his voice deeply agitated, and then she draws her hand from his, and an instant later is lost to sight.

CHAPTER IX.

"Young hearts, bright eyes, and rosy lips are there,
And fairy steps, and light and laughing voices,
Ringing like welcome music through the air—
A sound at which the untroubled heart rejoices."

HON. MRS. NORTON.

PORTIA, dressed in *merveilleux* of a cream shade, with a soft, yellow rose in her hair, is looking her loveliest. She is a little languid after her walk, and a little *distraite*, but desirable beyond words. She is coquetting with her dinner, rather than eating it, and is somewhat uncomfortably conscious that Fabian's eyes are perpetually wandering in her direction.

Dicky Browne is talking gaily, and is devoting himself with an ardour worthy of a better cause to Julia Beaufort, who is chattering inanely about many things, and who is in her element, and a blood-coloured gown.

They have all the conversation to themselves, these two, as the others are depressed, or rather impressed, by Sir Christopher's silence, who has one of his brooding fits upon him. Either the re-

doubtable Bowles disagreed with him, or he disagreed with Bowles, because clouds have crowned his brow since his return home.

Mrs. Beaufort by this time has got to Sardou's last comedy, and Dicky, who never heard of it or its author, comes to a conversational stand-still. This means uninterrupted quiet all round, as nobody else is saying anything. The footsteps of the solemn butler, and his equally solemn assistant, is all the sound one hears, and presently they all wake to the fact that something *must* be said, and *soon.*

"What wretched artichokes!" says Dulce, coming nobly to the front, with a laudable desire to fill up the yawning gap.

"Yes—melancholy," says Roger, backing her up, as in duty bound; "out of all heart, apparently."

At this weak attempt at a joke Dicky grins approvingly.

"I know few people so altogether sufficing as our Roger," he says, patronisingly, addressing nobody in particular; and as nobody in particular appears to think it necessary to answer him, conversation once more languishes.

Sir Mark—who can always find resources in his dinner, whatever else may fail him—is placidly happy, so is Mrs. Beaufort, though, perhaps, she is

a little sorry that her sleeves have not been made as tight as Portia's, and with the second puffing, which is certainly beyond all praise!

"What's this?" asks Sir Christopher, addressing the butler in a resigned tone, and looking at a round, soft mass that has just been laid before him.

"Suet dumpling, Sir Christopher," replies the butler, apologetically.

"Again!" says Sir Christopher, in an indescribable manner.

"Surely not *again*," repeats Dulce, with unpleasant animation. "It *can't* be that frightful thing *again*, after all I said to cook yesterday!"

"I'm afraid it is 'em," says the butler, very sadly.

"And this is the cook Miss Gaunt so highly recommended!" says Dulce, wrathfully. "Save me from my friends, say I; can't she make anything else, Martin?"

"This is a gooseberry-tart, 'em," whispers the butler, respectfully, a faint shade of encouragement in his voice, laying that delicacy before her.

"That means sugar—lots of sugar," says Dicky Browne, who is sitting close to her. "I'm glad of that, I like lots of sugar."

Portia laughs.

"You are like my lord mayor's fool," she says; "you like everything that is sweet."

"I do," says Dicky, fondly; "that's why I like you."

"I think it was very wrong of Miss Gaunt to impose such a woman upon us," says Dulce, deeply aggrieved.

"Never trust an old maid," says Roger; "I spend my life giving you good advice, which you won't take; and such an old maid, too, as Miss Gaunt! She is as good (or as bad) as two rolled into one."

"She said she was a perfect treasure," exclaims Miss Blount, casting an indignant glance at him.

"Send her back her treasure, then, and tell her, as you are not selfish, you could not think of depriving *her* of her services."

"Is that a sample of your good advice?" asks she, with considerable scorn. "Besides, I can't; I have agreed with this woman to stay here for a month."

"Fancy suet dumplings every day for a month," says Dicky Browne, unfeelingly; "that means four weeks—thirty-one days! We shall be dead, I shouldn't wonder, long before that."

"No such luck," says Sir Mark.

"Give her anything she wants, Dulce, and send her away," says Sir Christopher.

"But she will think me so unkind and capricious," protests Dulce, who is an arrant little coward, and is afraid to tell cook she no longer requires her. The cook is a big, Scotch woman, with very large bones, and a great many of them.

"Well, do whatever you like," says uncle Christopher, wearily.

The night is fine, calm, and cool, and sweet with many perfumes. Some of them at table cast lingering glances at the lawn without, and long, silently, to be standing on it. The moon has risen, and casting across it great streaks of silver light that brighten and darken as clouds race each other o'er Astarte's sacred brow.

There is great silence on the air, broken only by a "murmuring winde, much like the sowne of swarming bees." A little rivulet in the far distance runs musically.

"Let us all go out," says Julia Beaufort, suddenly, feeling she has already spent quite too long a time over her biscuit and claret.

"Ah! thank you," says Portia, quickly, turning to her almost before she has finished speaking—her great soft eyes even larger than usual. "I have been so longing to say that, for the last five minutes."

"The 'lost chord' has been struck again," says

Dicky Browne. "Mrs. Beaufort, I won't be deserted in this bare-faced fashion. If you are determined to court death through night dews, *I* shall court it with you."

Julia simpers, and looks delighted. Then they all rise from the table, and move towards the balcony; all—that is—except Sir Mark, who (though he would have dearly liked to accompany them into the mystic moonlight) still lingers behind to bear company with Sir Christopher, and strive to lay the ghost that so plainly is haunting him to-night.

Joyously they all descend the steps, and then break into a little run as their feet touch the velvet grass. The sky is bright with pale blue light, the air is soft and warm as sultry noon. A little baby wind—that ought to be in bed, so sweet and tender it is—is roaming here and there amongst the flowers, playing with the scented grasses, and losing itself amongst the bracken, lower down.

One can hear the roar of the distant ocean breaking itself against the giant rocks; one can hear, too, in strange contrast, the chirp, chirp of the green grasshopper.

As they come within view of the fountain, all their mouths form themselves into many round Os, and they say, "Ah!" as with one breath.

The scene is indeed charming beyond descrip-

tion. The water of the fountain is bright as silver, great patches of purest moonlight lying on it as calm as though in death. The water-lilies tremble faintly, as it might be in terror of the little gods who are leaning over them. A shadow from the trees in the background falls athwart a crouching Venus. Some pretty, low chairs are standing scattered about, and Portia sinking into one, the others all follow her example, and seating themselves on chairs on the soft sward begin to enjoy themselves.

The men produce cigars, and are presently happy in their own way. Roger, or Dicky, asks every one, indiscriminately, if she would like a cigarette; a question responded to in the negative by all, though in truth Dulce would have dearly liked one.

Fabian, who has come with them, is lying full length upon the grass, with his hands behind his head, gazing dreamily at the glimpse of the far-off sea, that shows through the dark-green firs. Dulce's silvery laugh is waking an echo lower down. There is a great sense of rest and happiness in the hour.

A big, lazy bumble-bee, tumbling sleepily into Portia's lap, wakes her into life. It lies upon her looking larger and blacker than its wont, as it

shows against the pallor of her gown. She starts, and draws herself up with a half-suppressed cry.

Fabian lifting the bee from her knees, flings it high into the air, and sends it off on the errand it was probably bound on before it fell in love with Portia.

"How foolish of me to be frightened of it—pretty thing," she says, with a faint blush. "How black it looked."

"*Every* thing frightens me," says Julia Beaufort pensively, "*everything!*"

"Do I?" asks Dicky Browne, in a tone full of abject misery. "Oh! *say* I don't."

"I meant insects you know, and frogs, and horrid things like that," lisps Julia. "And they always will come flying round one just on a perfect night like this, when"—sentimentally—"Nature is wrapt in its profoundest beauty!"

"I don't think I ever saw a frog fly," says Dicky Browne, innocently. "Is it nice to look at? Is it funny?"

"No! it's only silly—like you!" says Dulce throwing a rose-bud at him, which he catches dexterously.

"Thank you," he says, meekly, whether for the speech or the flower, he leaves vague.

"Stephen Gower is coming over here to-night," says Roger, suddenly.

"To-night! Why didn't you ask him to dinner?" asks Dulce, a note of surprise in her tone.

"I did ask him, but, for some reason I now forget, he could not come. He confessed he was lonely, however, in that big barn of a house, and said he would feel deeply grateful if you would permit him to drop in later on. I said you would; and advised him to drop in by all means, though how people do that has always been a puzzle to me."

"Who is Stephen Gower?" asks Portia, curiously, of no one in particular. She is leaning back in her chair, and is fanning herself languidly.

"He is Roger's *Fidus Achates*,—his second self —his very soul!" says Dicky Browne, enthusiastically. "He is a thing apart. We must, in fact, be careful of him, lest he break. At least so I have been told."

"I thought you knew him, too," says Dulce, "I always believed you and Roger, and this wonderful Stephen Gower, were all at college together."

"You wronged Dicky, albeit unwittingly," says Mr. Dare, taking his cigar from between his lips to give more emphasis to his words. "We at Cambridge were too frivolous for such superior beings as Dicky. It was at Oxford he commenced his honour-

able career; it was there he indulged in those high hopes of future fame, that have been so splendidly realised in his maturer years."

"Don't kick me when I'm down," says Dicky, pathetically. "I couldn't help it—and at least I have *had* my hopes. That must be always something. It's any amount soothing, do you know, to look back upon your past, and remember what a jolly ass you once were!"

"I can't imagine your ever having had hopes of future fame," says Dulce, laughing.

"Well I had, do you know, any amount of 'em. In the early dawn, when I was awake—which, perhaps, wasn't so often as it sounds, except when I was returning from—er—a friend's house. I used to sit up with them, you know, whenever they had scarla"—

"Oh yes, *we* know," interrupts Roger, most unfeelingly.

"Well, in the early dawn," continues Dicky, quite unmoved, "when the little birds were singing, I used to think I could be happy as General Sir Richard Browne, at the head of a gallant corps, with a few darkies in the foreground fleeing before my trusty blade. By breakfast time, however, all that would be changed, and I would glory in the belief that one day would see me seated on the

wool-sack. By-dinner-time I was clothed in sanctimonious lawn; and long before the small hours, I felt myself a second Drake, starting to conquer another Armada, only one even *more* Invincible."

They all laugh at him. And then he laughs at himself, and seems, indeed, to enjoy the joke even more than they do.

"I don't care," he says, at length, valiantly; "no, not a single screw. I have'nt *done* anything, you know."

"Oh yes, you have, a lot in your time," murmurs Roger, supportingly.

"But I must come in for the title and the estate when the old boy, my cousin, 'shuffles off this mortal coil,' and in the meantime the governor stands to me decently enough, and I'm pretty jolly all round."

"Tell us about Stephen Gower," says Dulce, after a pause, "He interests me, I don't know why. What is he like?"

"He is—

> 'A greenery yallery
> Grosvenor gallery
> Foot-in-the-grave young man,'"

quotes Dicky, gaily.

"An æsthetic! Oh! I *do* hope not," exclaims Dulce, in a horrified tone.

"Have they pursued me even down here?" asks

Portia, faintly, "I thought, I *hoped*, they were plants indigenous to London soil alone."

"He is nothing of the sort," says Roger, indignantly. "He is about the best fellow I know. He would be ashamed to go round (like those idiots you speak of) with flowers and flowing locks. He leaves all that sort of thing"—contemptuously—"to girls."

"Who is talking of Stephen Gower?" asks Sir Mark, coming towards them over the path of moonlight that lies upon the smooth lawn. "Happy man to be discussed by so fair a trio, 'beneath the sweet-smelling starlight," as James has it."

"Bless me," says Dicky, "I had no idea dry monopole would have had such an effect on Gore. He is talking poetry, I think; I never could understand it myself. Now for example, about those stars —*do* they smell? *I* never noticed it. What's it like, Gore?"

Everyone disdains to take notice of this sally—all, that is, except Dulce, who is always only too delighted to laugh whenever the barest chance of being able to do so presents itself.

Roger, crossing over to where she sits, leans his arms on the back of her chair, and bends his face to hers.

"Look here," he says, in the conciliatory tone of

one who is going to make a request and is not quite sure it will be granted. "If Gower comes down by-and-bye, I wish you would promise me to be good to him. He is a very old chum of mine, and a very good fellow, and—be civil to him, will you?"

"Why, what do you suppose I am going to do to him?" asks Miss Blount, opening her eyes. "Was I bad to him at luncheon? Are you afraid I shall bite him? I shan't. You may be happy about that."

"Of course—I know; but I want you to be *particularly* nice to him," goes on Roger, though faintly discouraged by her tone. (Now what did she mean by saying she *wouldn't* bite him. It sounds as if she would bite him!) "He is the oldest friend I have; and—er—as we are to be married some time or other, I want him to like you very much."

"Who are to be married? You and Mr. Gower? It sounded like it," says Dulce, wilfully.

"I was thinking of you and myself," he says, a little gravely.

"Well, what is it you want me to do?" asks she, moving restlessly in her seat. She is, in spite of herself, disturbed by his gravity. "Am I to make love to him, or am I to let him make love to me? Your devotion to this old friend is quite touching."

"He would be very unlikely indeed to make love to you," replies Roger, rather stiffly. "He under-

stands perfectly how matters are between you and me."

"Oh, no doubt," says Miss Blount, disgustedly. "Everyone seems to know all about this *absurd* engagement. I can't think how I was ever brought to consent to it."

"*Absurd!*" says Mr. Dare, in an impossible tone.

"Yes, *painfully* absurd! Quite too ridiculous," with unpleasant force.

"Oh!" says Mr. Dare.

"Yes," says Dulce, still defiant, though a little ashamed of herself, "it is quite enough to make people *hate* people, all this perpetual gossip."

"You are at least honest," he says, bitterly.

Silence.

Dulce, whose tempers are always short-lived, after a little reflection grows very repentant.

Turning to him, she lays her little hand on his, as it still rests on the arm of her chair, and says, softly:

"I have been cross to you. Forgive me. I did not quite mean it. Tell me again what you want me to do about your friend."

"It was only a little matter," says Roger, in a low tone, "and it was, I think, the first favour I ever asked of you; and I thought, perhaps——"

He pauses. And raising himself from his loung-

ing position, on her chair, moves as though he would go away from her, having abandoned all hope of having his request acceded to.

But as he turns from her, her fingers tighten upon his, and so she detains him.

"What is it now?" he asks, coldly, trying to keep up his dignity, but, as his glance meets hers, he melts. And, in truth, just now she could have thawed a much harder heart, for on her *mignon* face sits one of her very loveliest smiles, conjured up for Roger's special benefit.

"Don't go away," she entreats, prettily, "and listen to me. I shall be charming to your friend. I shall devote myself exclusively to him if it will please you; and if only to prove to you that I *can* grant you a favour."

"Thank you," says Roger, gratefully. Then he regards her meditatively for a moment, and then says, slowly:

"Don't be too kind to him."

"Could I?" says Dulce, naïvely.

He laughs a little, and, bending his head, presses his lips to the little slender hand that still rests within his own.

The caress is so unusual that Dulce glances at him curiously from under her long lashes. A faint, pink glow creeps into her cheeks. She is surprised;

perhaps, too, a little pleased, because once again this evening she bestows upon him a smile, soft and radiant.

Mr. Browne is rambling on in some incoherent fashion to Julia Beaufort. Sir Mark is telling Portia some quaint little stories. Fabian is silently listening to them, stretched at Portia's feet.

The last glimpse of day has gone. "Death's twin sister, Sleep," has fallen upon the earth. One by one the sweet stars come out in the dusky vault above, "spirit-like, infinite."

In amongst the firs that stand close together in a huge clump at the end of the lawn, great shadows are lying, that, stretching ever and ever farther, form at last a link between the land and the sea.

"Ah! here you are, Stephen," says Sir Mark, addressing the languid young man they had met in the morning, who is coming to them across the grass. "Why didn't you come sooner?"

"They wouldn't give me any dinner until about an hour ago," says the languid young man in a subdued voice. He glances from Portia to Julia Beaufort, and then to Dulce. There his glance rests. It is evident he has found what he seeks.

"Dulce, I think I told you Stephen Gower was coming to-night," says Roger, simply. And then Dulce rises and rustles up to him, and filled with

the determination to keep sacred her promise to be particularly nice to Roger's friend, holds out to him a very friendly hand, and makes him warmly welcome.

Then Portia makes him a little bow, and Julia simpers at him, and presently he finds himself accepted by, and admitted to the bosom of the family, which, indeed, is a rather nondescript one. After a few moments of unavoidable hesitation, he throws himself at Dulce's feet, and, leaning on his elbow, tells himself country-life, after all, isn't half a bad thing.

"What a heavenly night it is," says Dulce, smiling down on him, still bent on fulfilling her word to Roger. Perhaps she is hardly aware how encouraging her smile can be. "See the ocean down there," pointing with a rounded, soft, bare arm, that gleams like snow in the moonlight, to where the sea is shining between the trees. "How near it seems, though we know it is quite far away."

"It is nearer to you than I am," says Mr. Gower, in a tone that might imply the idea that he thinks the ocean in better case than himself.

"Well, not just now," says Dulce, laughing.

"Not just now," returns he, echoing her laugh. "I suppose we should be thankful for small mercies;

but I wish the Fens was a little nearer to this place than it is."

"Portia, can you see Inca's Cliff from this?" asks Dulce, looking at her cousin. "You remember the spot where we saw the little blue flowers yesterday, that you so coveted. How clearly it stands out now beneath the moonbeams."

"Like burnished silver," says Portia, dreamily, always with a lazy motion wafting her black fan to and fro. "And those flowers—how I longed for them, principally, I suppose, because they were beyond my reach."

"Where are they," asks Roger. "I never remember seeing blue flowers there."

"Oh! *you* wouldn't notice them," says his *fiancée*, a fine touch of petulance in her tone, that makes Gower lift his head to look at her; "but they were there nevertheless. They were the very colour of the Alpine gentian, and so pretty. We quite fell in love with them, Portia and I, Portia especially; but we could not get at them, they were so low down."

"There was a tiny ledge we might have stood on," says Portia, "but our courage failed us, and we would not try it."

"And quite right, too," says Sir Mark. "I detest people who climb precipices and descend cliffs. It makes my blood run cold."

"Then what made you climb all those Swiss mountains, two years ago?" asks Julia Beaufort, who has a talent for saying the wrong thing, and who has quite forgotten the love-affair that drove Sir Mark abroad at that time.

"I don't know," replies he, calmly; "I never shall I suppose. I perfectly hated it all the while, especially the guides, who were more like assassins than anything else. I think they hated me, too, and would have given anything to pitch me over some of the passes."

Portia laughs.

"I can sympathise with you," she says. "Danger of any sort has no charm for me. Yet, I wanted those flowers. I think"—idly—"I shall always want them, simply because I can't get them."

"You shall have them in three seconds if you will only say the word," says Dicky Browne, who is all but fast asleep, and who looks quite as like descending a rugged cliff as Portia herself.

"I am so glad I don't know the 'word,'" says Portia with a little grimace. "It would be a pity to endanger a valuable life like yours."

Dulce turns to Mr. Gower.

"You may smoke if you like," she says, sweetly —"I know you are longing for a cigarette or something, and *we* don't mind."

"Really though?" says Gower.

"Yes, really. Even our pretty town-lady here," indicating Portia, "likes the perfume in the open air."

"Very much indeed," says Portia, graciously, leaning a little towards Gower, and smiling sweetly.

"A moment ago I told myself I could not be happier," says Stephen, glancing at Dulce. "And indeed I wanted nothing further — but if I may smoke — if I have your permission to light this," producing a cigar, "I shall feel that my end is near; I shall know that the gods love me, and that therefore I *must* die young."

As he places the cigar between his lips he leans back again at Dulce's feet with a sigh suggestive of unutterable bliss.

"We were talking about you just before you came," says Dulce, with a little friendly nod, bending over his recumbent form, and making him a present of a very adorable smile. "We had all, you know, formed such different opinions about you."

"What was your opinion?" asks he, rising to a sitting posture with an alacrity not to be expected from a youth of his indolence. In this last attitude, however, it is easier to see Dulce's charming face. "I *should* like to know that."

His manner implies that he would not like to hear the opinion of the others.

"It was nothing very flattering, I am afraid," says Dulce, with a little laugh. "I was—to confess the truth—just in the very faintest degree nervous about you."

"About *me!*"

"Yes," she laughed softly again, "I thought you might be a 'blue-and-white young man,' and that idea filled me with dismay. I don't think I like a 'soul-ful eyed young man' *too* much."

"I'm so glad I'm of the 'threepenny 'bus' lot," says Gower, with a smile. "Ye Gods! what a shocking thought is the other. Look at my hair, I entreat you Miss Blount, and tell me does it resemble the lanky locks of Oscar?"

"No, it is anything but wylde," says Dulce, glancing at his shaven crown, that any hermit might be proud of; "and do you know I am glad of your sanity, I should quite hate you if you were a disciple of that school."

"Poor school," says Gower, pityingly, "for the first time, I feel deep sympathy for it. But with regard to myself I am flattered you troubled yourself to think of me at all. Did it really matter to you what my convictions might be?"

"Yes, of course!" says Dulce, opening her eyes,

and showing herself half in fun, half in earnest, and wholly desirable. "Such a near neighbour as you must be! I suppose we shall see a good deal of you —at least"—sweetly—"I hope we shall—and how would it be with us if you called here every morning with lanky tresses, and a cadaverous face, and words culled from a language obsolete?"

This little speech quite dazzles Gower. Not the sauciness of it, but the under-current of kindliness. "*Every* morning!" Does she really mean that he may come up to this enchanting spot every morning?

It had, of course, occurred to him during prayers, in the early part of the day, when he had sat out the dreary service with exemplary patience, and his eyes fixed on the Blount pew, that perhaps he might be allowed to call once a week at the Hall without being considered by the inmates an absolute nuisance —but every day! this sounds too good to be true, and is therefore received by him with caution.

"You needn't be afraid of me," he says, apropos of Dulce's last remark. "I can speak no language but my own, and that badly."

"What a comfort," says Miss Blount. She is now wondering if she has done her duty by her new guest, and if she has been everything to him that she ought to have been, considering her promise to Roger.

"Where is Fabian?" she asks, suddenly, peering through the dusky gloom. "Are you there, darling?"

But no one answers her. It seems to them, that, tiring of their company, he has betaken himself to solitude and the house, once more. No one has seen him go, but, during the last few minutes, a grey black cloud has been slowly wandering over the pale-faced moon, and forms and features have been more indistinct. Perhaps Portia, who is sitting on the outer edge of the group, might have noticed his departure, but, if so, she says nothing of it.

Time runs on. Some one yawns, and then tries vainly to turn it into a sigh. The bell from some distant steeple in the little slumbering village far below in the plain, tolls slowly, solemnly, as though to warn them that eleven more hours have slipped into the great and fathomless sea of Eternity.

"Ah! so late!" says Dulce, with a little start. "How swiftly time has gone to-night. I never knew it fly with such hot haste. That proves I have been happy, does it not?"

She smiles down upon Mr. Gower, who is still at her feet, and he smiles up only too willingly at her.

At this moment a dark figure emerges from amongst the moaning firs, and comes towards them.

In the uncertain and somewhat ghostly light it appears of an unusually large size. Dulce draws her breath a little quickly, and Julia, feeling her duty lies in this direction, gives way to a dainty scream. Portia, whose eyes have been upon this new comer for a full minute before the others noticed him, only turns her head away, and lets it sink a degree more lazily into the cushion of her chair.

The firs mounting high into the sky, stand out boldly against their azure back-ground. Fabian, in answer to Julia's touch of affectation, advances with more haste, and says—

"It is only me," in his usual clear, slow voice.

Passing by Portia's chair, he drops into her lap a little bunch of dark blue flowers.

"Ah!" she says, quickly, then checks herself. Taking up the deeply-dyed blossoms, she lays them in her pink palm, and, bending her face over them, examines them silently. Sir Mark, regarding her curiously from the back-ground, wonders whether she is thinking of them or of their donor.

"Why those are the flowers we were talking about," says Dulce, with a faint contraction of her brows. "Fabian! Did you risk your life to get them?"

"Your life!" says Portia, in an indescribable tone, and as if the words are drawn from her against

her will. I think she had made up her mind to keep utter silence, but some horror connected with Dulce's hasty remark has unbound her lips. She turns her eyes upon him, and he can see by the moonlight that her face is very white.

"My dear fellow," says Sir Mark, "you grow more eccentric daily. Now this last act was rashness itself. That cliff is very nearly impassable, and in this uncertain light——"

"It was the simplest thing in the world," says Fabian, coldly. "There was the ledge Dulce told you of, and plenty of tough heather to hold on by. I assure you, if there was the smallest danger, I should not have attempted it. And, besides, I was fully rewarded for any trouble I undertook. The view up there to-night is magnificent."

To Portia it is an easy matter to translate this last remark. He is giving her plainly to understand that he neither seeks nor desires thanks from *her*. The view has sufficed him. It was to let his eyes feast upon the glorious riches Nature had spread before him, that led him up the mountain-side, not a foolish longing to gratify her whim at any cost to himself.

She looks at the flowers again, and with one taper finger turns them over and over in her hand.

"Well, good people," says Sir Mark, rising to

his feet, "as it is eleven o'clock, and as the dew is falling, and as you are all plainly bent on committing suicide by means of rheumatism, neuralgia, and catarrhs generally, I shall leave you, and seek my virtuous couch."

"What's a catarrh?" asks Dicky Browne, confidentially, of no one in particular.

"A cold in your nose," replies Roger, uncompromisingly.

"I thought it was something to play on," says Mr. Browne, unabashed.

"Dear me! Is it really eleven?" asks Julia. "I should never have thought it,"—in reality she thought it was twelve—"why did you not tell me?"—this to the attentive Dicky, who is placing a shawl round her shoulders—"you must have known."

"'With thee conversing I forget all time,'" quotes that ardent personage, with a beautiful smile. "I thought it was only nine."

Even with this flagrant lie, Julia is well pleased.

"Dulce, tuck up your gown, the grass is really wet," says Roger, carelessly, "and put this round you." He goes up to her, as he speaks, with a soft white scarf in his hands.

"Thank you; Mr. Gower will put it on for me," says Dulce,—rather more wilfully than coquettishly handing the wrap to Stephen, who takes it as if it

was some sacred symbol, and, with nervous care, smothers her slender figure in it. Roger, with a faint shrug, turns away, and devotes his attentions to Sir Mark.

Portia, still with the flowers in her hand, has wandered away from the others, and entering the drawing-room before they have mounted the balcony steps, goes up to a mirror and regards herself attentively for a moment.

A little gold brooch, of Indian workmanship, is fastening the lace at her bosom. She loosens it, and then raises the flowers (now growing rather crushed and drooping) as if with the evident intention of placing them, by means of the brooch, against her neck.

Yet, even with her hand half lifted she hesitates, glances at her own image again; and finally, turning away, leaves the brooch empty.

Fabian, entering the drawing-room at this moment with the others, has had time to notice the action, the hesitation, everything.

Then comes bed hour. The men prepare to go to the smoking-room—the women think fondly of their own rooms and their maids.

Fabian, lighting a candle, takes it up to Portia. They are all standing in the hall now, beneath the light of the hanging lamps. She smiles her thanks

without letting her eyes meet his, and lets him place the candle in her left hand.

"Have you hurt this?" he asks, lightly touching her right hand as he speaks.

"No." She pauses a moment, and then, slowly opening her closed fingers, shows him the blue flowers lying therein.

"They are lovely," she says, in a low tone, "and I *did* wish for them. But never—*never*—do that again."

"Do what again?"

"Endanger your life for me."

"There was no danger—and you had expressed a wish for them."

CHAPTER X.

"Every one is as God made him, and oftentimes a great deal worse!"—MIGUEL DE CERVANTES.

WITH a continuous sob and roar from the distant ocean the storm beats on. All night it has hurled itself upon path and lawn with impotent fury; towards morning it still rages, and even now, when noonday is at its height, its anger is not yet expended.

The rain falls in heavy torrents, the trees bow and creak most mournfully, the rose leaves—sweet-scented and pink as glowing morn—are scattered along the walks, or else, lifted high in air by vehement gusts of wind, are dashed hither and thither in a mazy dance full of passion and despair.

"Just three o'clock," says Dulce, drearily, "and what weather!"

"It is always bad on your day," says Julia, with a carefully suppressed yawn. Julia when yawning is not pretty. "I remember when I was here last year that Thursday, as a rule, was the most melancholy day in the week."

Indeed, as she speaks she looks more than melancholy, almost aggrieved. She has donned her most sensational garments (there is any amount of red about them) and her most recherché cap to greet the country, and nought cometh but the rain.

"I don't know anything more melancholy at any time than one's at-home day," says Dicky Browne, meditatively, and very sorrowfully; "it is like Sunday, it puts every one out of sorts, and creates evil tempers all round. I never yet knew any family that didn't go down to zero when brought face to face with the fact that to-day they must receive their friends."

"It's a pity you can't talk sense," says Dulce, with a small curl of her upper lip.

"It's a pity I *can*, you mean. I am too aboveboard, too genuine for the times in which we live. My candour will be my ruin!" says Mr. Browne, hopelessly unabashed.

"It will!" declares Roger, in a tone that perhaps it will be wise not to go into.

"I suppose nobody will come here to-day," says Portia, somewhat disappointedly; they have been indoors all day and have become so low in spirit, that even the idea of possible visitors is to be welcomed with delight.

"Nobody," returns Sir Mark, "except the Boers

and Miss Gaunt, and *they* are utter certainties; they always come; they never fail us; they are thoroughly safe people in every respect."

"If Miss Gaunt inflicts herself upon us to-day (which the Gods forbid) be sure you pitch into her about the cook she sent you," says Roger, gloomily, turning to Dulce. "That will be a topic of conversation at all events; you owe me a debt of gratitude for suggesting it."

"Well I shan't pay it," says Miss Blount, with decision.

"Well you *ought*. As a rule the attempts at conversation down here are calculated to draw tears to the eyes of any intellectual person."

"But why?" asks Portia, indolently.

"It is utterly simple," says Roger, mildly. "There is nothing to talk about; you cannot well ask people what they had for dinner yesterday, without being rude, and there are no theatres, or concerts, or clubs to discuss, and nobody ever dies (the country is fatally healthy), and nobody ever gets married (because there is nobody to marry), and nothing is ever born, because they were all born years ago, or else have made up their minds never to be born at all. It is in fact about as unsatisfactory a neighbourhood as any one could wish to inhabit."

"I daresay there are worse," says Dulce.

"You have strong faith," retorts Roger.

"Well it would be a nice question to decide," says Sir Mark, amiably, with a view to restoring order.

"I don't think it is half a bad place," says Dicky Browne, genially, addressing nobody in particular, and talking for the mere sake of hearing his own voice.

"Dicky, I love you!" says Dulce, triumphantly.

"Lucky Dicky," says Roger, with an only half-suppressed sneer, which brings down upon him a withering glance from his betrothed.

"How I hate rain," she says, pettishly, tapping the window with two impatient little fingers.

"I love it," says Roger, unpleasantly.

"Love rain!" with an air of utter disbelief. "How can you make such a ridiculous remark! I never heard of *any* one who liked rain."

"Well, you hear of me now. *I* like it."

"Oh! nonsense," says Miss Blount, contemptuously.

"It *isn't* nonsense!" exclaims he, angrily, "I suppose I am entitled to my own likes and dislikes. You can hate rain as much as you do *me* if you wish it; but at least allow me to——"

"Love it, as you do me," with an artificial laugh, and a soft shrug of her rounded shoulders. "It is

perfectly absurd, in spite of your obstinate determination to say you do, I don't believe you *can* have a desire for wet weather."

"Thank you!" indignantly, "That is simply giving me the lie direct. I must say you *can* be uncivil when you choose."

"Uncivil!"

"Decidedly uncivil, and even more than that."

"What do you mean? I insist on knowing what you mean by more."

"They're at it again," says Mr. Browne, at this auspicious moment, waving his hand in an airy fashion in the direction of our two belligerents.

Mr. Browne is a person who can always say and do what he likes for several reasons, the principal being that nobody pays the smallest attention to either his sayings or doings. Everybody likes Dicky, and Dicky as a rule likes everybody. He has a father and a home somewhere, but where (especially with regard to the former), is vague.

The home, certainly, is kept up for nobody except the servants, as neither Dicky nor his father ever put in an appearance there. The latter (who has never yet mastered the fact that he is growing old), spends all his time in the favourite window of his Club, in Pall Mall, with his nose pressed against the pane and his attention irrevocably fixed upon

the passers by on the other side of the way. This is his sole occupation from morning till night; unless one can take notice of a dismal and most diabolical tattoo that at unfortunate moments he is in the habit of inflicting upon the window, and the nerves of the other occupants of the room in which he may be.

Dicky puts in most of his time at Blount Hall. Indeed, it has grown to be a matter of speculation with the Blounts whether in the event of his marriage he will not elect to bring his bride also to stay with them for good and all! They have even gone so far as to hope he will marry a *nice* girl, and one whom they can receive in the spirit of love.

"I don't think they really ever quite enjoy themselves, until they are on the verge of bloodshed," says Sir Mark, in answer to Dicky's remark. "They are the very oddest pair I ever met."

All this is said quite out loud, but so promising is the quarrel by this time, that neither Dulce nor Roger hear one word of it.

"You do it on purpose," Dulce is saying, in a tone in which tears and extreme wrath fight for mastery. "You torment me from morning till night. You are both rude and unkind to me. And now—*now*—what is it you have just said?"

"What have I said?" asks Roger, who is plainly frightened.

"What indeed! I should be ashamed to repeat it. But I know you said I was uncivil, and that I told lies, and any amount of things that were even worse."

"What on earth is the matter now with you two children?" asks Sir Mark, coming for the second time to the rescue.

"I'm sure *I* don't know," says Roger, desperately. "It was all about the rain I think. She is angry because I like it. How can I help that. I can't be born again with other preferences just to oblige *her*."

"There is some comfort in *that* thought," says Miss Blount, vindictively. "One of you in a century is *quite* sufficient."

"Oh! come now, Dulce," protests Sir Mark, kindly. "You don't mean that you know. And besides, only pretty speeches should come from pretty lips."

"Well, he does nothing but tease me," says Dulce, tearfully; "He makes my life perfectly wretched to me."

"How *can* you say that!" exclaims Dare, indignantly. "I spend my whole time trying to please you—in vain! It is your own temper is at fault."

"You hear that?" exclaims Dulce, triumphantly, turning to Sir Mark, who is trying vainly to edge in one word.

"I maintain what I say," goes on Roger, hurriedly, fearful lest Sir Mark if he gets time, will say something to support Dulce's side of the question. "It *can't* be my fault. You know I am very fond of you. There have even been moments," says Mr. Dare, superbly, "when if you had asked me to lie down and let you trample on me, I should have done it!"

"Then do it!" says Dulce, with decision. "Now this moment. I am in an awful temper, and my heels are an inch and a half high. I should perfectly *love* to trample on you. So make haste"—imperiously, "hurry, I'm waiting."

"I shan't," says Dare; "I shan't make myself ridiculous for a girl who detests me."

"Now, isn't that just like him," says Dulce, appealing to the company at large, who are enjoying themselves intensely—notably Mr. Browne. "Simply because I told him it would give me some slight pleasure if he fulfilled his promise, he has decided on breaking it. He has refused to keep his solemn word, just to vex me."

"That is not my reason."

"Then you are afraid of the high-heeled shoes," with a scornful laugh.

"I am afraid of nothing," hotly.

"Not even of ridicule?"

"Well, yes, I *am* afraid of that. Most fellows are. But I don't wish to carry on the argument, I have nothing more to say to you."

"Nor I to you. I hope you will never address me again as long as you live. Ah!" glancing out of the window, with an assumption of the most extreme relief and joy—"Here is Mr. Gower coming across the lawn. I *am* glad. Now at least I shall have some one to talk to me who will not scold and quarrel incessantly, and who can sometimes behave like a gentleman."

"Tell him so. It will raise him to the seventh Heaven of delight, no doubt," says Roger, in an indescribable tone.

"I thought it was arranged that we were not to speak to each other again," says Dulce, with considerable severity.

Now, Portia being strange to the household is a little frightened, and a good deal grieved by this passage at arms.

"Is it really so bad as they would have us think," she says in a low tone to Sir Mark, whom

she has beckoned to her side. "Is it really all over between them?"

"Oh, dear no!" says Sir Mark, with the fine smile that characterises his lean dark face. "Don't make yourself unhappy; *we* are quite accustomed to their idiosyncrasies by this time, you, of course, have yet much to learn. But when I tell you that to my certain knowledge they have bid each other an eternal adieu every week during the past three years, you will have your first lesson in the art of understanding them."

"Ah! you give me hope," says Portia, smiling.

At this moment Mr. Gower enters the room.

"Ah! how d'ye do!" says Dulce, nestling up to him, her soft skirts making a gentle frou-frou as she moves, "*so* glad you have come. You are late, are you not?"—she gives him her hand, and smiles up into his eyes. To all the others her excessive cordiality means only a desire to chagrin Dare, to Stephen Gower it means — well, perhaps, at this point of their acquaintance he hardly knows what it means—but it certainly heightens her charms in his sight.

"Am I?" he says, in answer to her remark. "That is just what has been puzzling me. My watch has gone to the bad, and all the way here I have felt as if the distance between my place and the

Hall was longer than I had ever known it before. If I am to judge by my own impatience to be here, I am late, indeed."

She smiles again at this, and says, softly:

"You are not wet I hope? Such a day to come out. It was a little rash, was it not?"

With the gentlest air of solicitude she lays one little white jewelled hand upon his coat sleeve, as though to assure herself no rain had alighted there. Gower laughs gaily.

"Wet? No," he says, gazing at her with unmistakable admiration. His eyes betray the fact that he would gladly have lifted the small jewelled hand from his arm to his lips, but as it is he does not dare so much as to touch it though never so lightly. "Rain does me more good than harm," he says.

"How did you come?" asks she, still charmingly anxious about his well-being.

"I rode. A very good mare too. Though it seemed to me she never travelled so slowly as to-day."

"You rode? Ah!—then you got all that last heavy shower," says Dulce, who has plainly made up her mind to go in for compassion of the very purest and simplest.

"My *dear* fellow!" puts in Roger at this juncture —"you don't half consider yourself. Why on earth

didn't you order out the covered carriage and a few fur rugs?"

Gower colours, but Roger is smiling so naturally that he cannot, without great loss of courtesy, take offence. Treating Dare's remark, however, as beneath notice, he turns and addresses himself solely to Dulce.

"To tell you the truth," he says, calmly, "I adore rain. A sunny hour is all very well in its way, and possesses its charms no doubt, but for choice give me a rattling good shower."

To Roger, of course, this assertion spoken so innocently, is quite too utterly delicious. Indeed, everybody smiles more or less, as he or she remembers the cause of the quarrel a moment since. Had Gower been thinking for ever, he could hardly have made a speech so calculated to annoy Dulce as that just made. To add to her discomfiture, Roger laughs aloud, a somewhat bitter, irritating laugh, that galls her to the quick.

"I must say I cannot sympathise with your taste," she says, very petulantly, to Gower; and then, before that young man has time to recover from the shock received through the abrupt change of her manner from "sweetness and light" to transcendental gloom, she finishes his defeat by turning her back upon him, and sinking into a chair beside Portia.

"A gleam of sunshine at last," exclaims Sir Mark, at this moment, coming for the third time to the surface, in the fond hope of once more restoring peace to those around.

"Ah, yes, it is true," says Portia, holding up her hand to let the solitary beam light upon it. It lies there willingly enough, and upon her white gown, and upon her knitting needles, that sparkle like diamonds beneath its touch.

"And the rain has ceased," says Julia. "How nice of it. By-the-bye, where is Fabian?"

"You know he never sees anyone," says Dulce, a little reproachfully, and in a very low tone.

"But why?" asks Portia, turning her face to Dulce. Even as she speaks she regrets her question, and she colours a hot beautiful crimson as the quick vehemence of her tone strikes on her own ears.

Sir Mark, leaning over her chair, says,

"Two lessons in one day? Ambitious pupil! Well, if you must learn, know this, Fabian never goes anywhere, except to church, and never receives anybody even in his own home, for a reason that, I suppose, even you are acquainted with." He looks keenly at her as he speaks.

"Yes—I know—that is, I have heard, of course," says Portia, in a very still fashion, bending her eyes upon her knitting once more.

"How suddenly the rain has ceased," says some one; "It will be a very charming evening after all."

"The flowers are already beginning to hold up their poor heads," says Dulce, gazing down anxiously at the "garden quaint and fair," that stretches itself beneath the window. "The skies are clearing, the clouds are melting away, far up above in the dark blue dome that overshadows the earth.

"'The great Minister of Nature, that upon the world imprints the virtue of the heaven, and doles out Time for us with his beam,' is coming slowly into view from between two dusky clouds, and is flinging abroad his yellow gleams of light."

"I hear wheels," says Dicky Browne, suddenly.

Everybody wakes up at once; and all the women try surreptitiously to get a glimpse of their hair in the mirrors.

"Who can it be?" says Dulce, anxiously.

"If we went to the upper window we could see," says Dicky Browne, kindly, whereupon they all rise in a body, and, regardless of tempers and dignity, run to the window that overlooks the avenue, and gaze down upon the gravel to see who fate may be bringing them.

It brings them a vehicle that fills them with consternation—a vehicle that it would be charitable to

suppose was built in the dark ages, and had never seen the light until now. It is more like a sarcophagus than anything else, and is drawn by the fossilized remains of two animals, that perhaps in happier times were named horses. For to-day, to enable their mistress to reach Blount Hall, they have plainly been galvanized, and have, in fact, traversed the road that lies between the Hall and Blount Hollow on strictly scientific principles.

"The Gaunt equipage!" says Dicky Browne, in an awe-struck tone. Nobody answers him. Everybody is over-filled with a sense of oppression, because of the fact that the ancient carriage beneath contains a still more ancient female, fatally familiar to them all. Smiles fade from their faces. All is gloom.

Meantime, the coachman (who has evidently come straight from the Ark), having turned some handle that compels the galvanised beasts to come to a standstill, descends, with slow and fearful steps, to the ground.

He has thrown the reins to another old man who is sitting on the box beside him, and who, though only ten years his junior, is always referred to by him as "the boy." Letting down a miraculous amount of steps, he gives his arm to a dilapidated

old woman, who, with much dignity, and more difficulty, essays to reach the gravel.

"Some day or other, when out driving," says Dicky Browne, meditatively, "those three old people will go to sleep, and those animated skeletons will carry them to the land where they would *not* be."

Then a step is heard outside, and they all run back to their seats, and sink into them, and succeed in looking exactly as if they had never quitted them for the past three hours, as the door opens and the man announces Miss Gaunt.

"Remember the puddings," says Dicky Browne, in a careful aside, as Dulce rises to receive her first guest.

She is tall,—and gaunt as her name. She is old, but strong minded. She affects women's rights, and all that sort of thing, and makes herself excessively troublesome at times. Women in her opinion are long-suffering, down-trodden angels; all men are brutes! Meetings got up for the purpose of making men and women detest each other are generously encouraged by her. It is useless to explain her further, as she has little to do with the story, and, of course, you have all met her once (I hope not twice) in your lifetimes.

Dulce goes up to greet her with her usual gracious smile. Then she is gently reminded that she

once met Julia Beaufort before, and then she is introduced to Portia. To the men she says little, regarding them probably as beings beneath notice, all, that is, except Dicky Browne, who insists on conversing with her, and treating her with the most liberal cordiality, whether she likes it or not.

Dexterously he leads up the conversation, until culinary matters are brought into question, when Miss Gaunt says in her slow crushing fashion:

"How do you like that last woman I sent you? Satisfactory, eh?"

"Cook, do you mean?" asks Dulce, to gain time.

"Yes—cook," says the old lady, uncompromisingly. "She was"—severely—"in my opinion, one of the best cooks I ever met."

"Yes, of course, I dare say. We just think her cooking a little monotonous," says poor Dulce, feeling as if she is a culprit fresh brought to the bar of justice.

"Monotonous!" says Miss Gaunt, in an affronted tone, giving her bonnet an indignant touch that plants it carefully over her left ear. "I don't think I understand. A monotonous cook! In my day there were bad cooks, and good cooks, and indifferent cooks, but monotonous cooks—never! Am I to believe by your accusation that she repeats herself?"

"Like history; exactly so. Very neat, indeed," says Mr. Browne, approvingly.

"Well, in the matter of puddings, she does—rather," says Dulce, somewhat fearfully.

"Ah! In point of fact, she doesn't suit you," says Miss Gaunt, fixing Dulce with a stony glare.

"There you are wrong," puts in Mr. Browne, regardless of the fact that she has treated all his other overtures with open contempt, "that is exactly what she does. Don't take a false impression of the case. She *suets* us tremendously! Doesn't she, Dulce?"

Here Miss Blount, I regret to say, laughs out loud, so does Sir Mark, to everybody's horror. Mr. Browne alone maintains a dignified silence. What Miss Gaunt might or might not have said on this occasion must now for ever remain unknown, as Sir Christopher enters at this moment, and shortly after him Mr. Boer.

"Was Florence unable to come? I hope she is quite well," says Dulce, with conventional concern.

"Quite, thank you. But she feared the air."

"The heir?" says Julia Beaufort, enquiringly, turning to Dicky, who is now unhappily quite close to her. Julia, who never listens to anything, has just mastered the fact that Florence Boer is under

discussion, and has heard the word "air" mentioned in connection with her.

"Yes. Didn't you hear of it?" says Dicky Browne, confidentially.

"No," says Julia, also confidentially.

"Why, it is common talk now," says Dicky, as if surprised at her ignorance on a subject so well known to the rest of the community.

"Never heard a word of it," says Julia. "Was it in the papers?"

"N—o. Hardly, I think," says Dicky.

Even as he ceases speaking, three words, emanating from Mr. Boer's ecclesiastical lips, attract Julia's attention. They are as follows: "sun and air!" He, poor man, has just been telling Dulce that his wife (who is slightly hypochondriacal) is very susceptible to the influences of both light and wind. Julia misunderstands. Misled by Dicky's wilfully false insinuation about Florence, whose incessant grievance it is that no baby has come to bless her fireside, she turns to the unfortunate curate and says blandly.

"Dear Mr. Boer, *so* glad! I never knew of it until this very instant, when I heard you telling Dulce of your sweet little son and heir. I congratulate you. Of course"—coquettishly—"you are very proud of it. Having had three dear babies of

my own I can quite rejoice with you and Mrs. Boer."

Deadly silence follows this outburst. Mr. Boer blushes a dingy red. The others relapse into an awed calm; all is confusion.

Portia is the first to recover herself.

"Dear Dulce, may we have our tea?" she says, sweetly, pointing to the table in the distance, where the man, five minutes ago, had placed the pretty sèvres cups and saucers.

By this time Julia has awakened to the fact that she has committed herself in some way unknown to her; has, in fact, taken a false step not now to be retrieved.

"What lovely cups!" she says, therefore, very hurriedly, to Dulce, pointing to the sèvres on the distant table, with a view to covering her confusion; "so chaste—so unique. I adore old china. I myself am something of a connoisseur. Whenever I have a spare penny," with an affected little laugh, "I go about collecting it."

"I wish she would collect herself," says Dicky Browne, in a careful aside; "I'm sure it is quite awful the way she has just behaved to poor Boer. Putting him in such an awkward position, you know. He looks just as if he had been found guilty of

some social misdemeanour. Look at him, Dulce, he isn't going to have a fit, is he?"

"I hope not," says Dulce, with a furtive glance at the discomfited Boer, "but what could have induced Julia to make that unlucky speech? Dicky, you horrid boy, I believe you could tell the truth about it if you would."

"I object to your insinuation," says Mr. Browne, "and I object also to being called a boy. Though after all"—reflectively—"I don't see why I should. The difference between the boy and man is so slight that nobody need create a feud about it. A boy has apples, toffy, twine, and penknives in his pocket—a young man has a pipe instead. It is really of no consequence, and perhaps the pipe is the cleanest. I give in, therefore, and I am *not* offended."

"But still, you have not answered me," says the astute Dulce. "Did you incite Julia to make that unpleasant speech?"

"I'd scorn to answer such a question," says Mr. Browne, loftily. "What a likely thing, indeed. If I had incited her she would have made a great deal more of her opportunity. 'Success,' says James, 'is passionate effort.' I made no effort, but——"

"Nonsense," says Dulce. "She made a most

disgraceful lot of *her* effort, at all events, and I do believe you were the instigator."

"'You wrong me every way, you wrong me, Brutus,'" quotes Mr. Browne, reproachfully. "However, let that pass. Tea is ready, I think. Pour it out, and be merciful."

Thus adjured, Miss Blount pours it out. She looks so utterly sweet in her soft leaf-green tea gown as she does it, that Mr. Gower, in spite of her unkindness of an hour agone, feels sufficient courage to advance, and offer himself a candidate for unlimited cups of tea.

He is quite three minutes at her elbow before she deigns to notice him. Then she turns; and letting her eyes rest on him as though she is for the first time made aware of his proximity, though in truth she has known of it for the past sixty seconds, she says, calmly—

"Bread and butter, or cake, Mr. Gower?" quite as innocently as if she is ignorant (which she is not) of his desire to be near her.

"Neither, thank you," says Stephen, gravely. "It was not that brought me to——"

"But please, do have some cake," says Miss Blount, lifting her eyes to his, and making him a present of a sweet and most unexpected smile. As

she says this, she holds out to him on a plate a pretty little bit of plum cake, which she evidently expects him to devour with relish. It is evident, too, that she presents it to him as a peace-offering, and as a sign that all animosity is at an end between them.

"No, thank you," says Mr. Gower, decidedly, but gratefully, and with a very tender smile, meant as a return for hers.

"Oh, but you must, indeed!" declares she, in a friendly fashion with a decisive shake of the head, and uplifted brows.

Now, Mr. Gower, poor soul, hates cake.

"Thanks, awfully," he says, in a deprecating tone, "I know it's nice, very nice, but—er—the fact is I can't bear cake. It—it's horrid, I think."

"Not this one," says Dulce, remorselessly—"you have never eaten a cake like this. Let me let you into a little secret; I am very fond of cooking, and I made this cake, *all myself*, with my own hands, every bit of it! There! Now, you really must eat it, you know, or I shall think you are slighting my attempts at housewifery."

"Oh! if you really made it *yourself*," says the doomed young man, in a resigned tone, trying to light his rejected countenance with an artificial

smile, "that makes such a difference, you know. I shall quite enjoy it now. But—er—" glancing doubtfully at her small white hands, "did you really make it yourself?"

"Should I say it, if not sure?" reproachfully, "I even mixed it all up, *so*," with a pantomimic motion of her fingers, that suggests the idea of tearing handfuls of hair out of somebody's head. "I put in the raisins and currants and everything myself, whilst cook looked on. And she says I shall be quite a grand cook myself presently if—if I keep to it; she says, too, I have quite the right turn in my wrists for making cakes."

"Is this the cook you don't like?" asks he, gloomily, while sadly consuming the cake she has pressed upon him. He is eating it slowly and with care; there is, indeed, no exuberant enjoyment in his manner, no touch of refined delight as he partakes of the delicacy manufactured by his dainty hostess.

"Yes," says Miss Blount, in a somewhat changed tone. "But what do *you* know of her."

"I think she's a humbug," says Gower, growing more moody every instant.

"Then you mean, of course, that she didn't mean one word she said to me, and that—that in effect,

I can't make cakes?" says Dulce, opening her large eyes, and regarding him in a manner that embarrasses him to the last degree. He rouses himself, and makes a supreme effort to retrieve his position.

"How could you imagine I meant that?" he says, putting the last morsel of the cake, with a thankful heart, into his mouth. "I don't know when I have enjoyed anything so much as this."

"Really you liked it. You thought it——"

"Delicious," with effusion.

"Have some more!" says Dulce, generously, holding out to him the cake plate near her. "Take a big bit. Take"—she has her eyes fixed rather searchingly upon his—"*this* piece."

Something in her manner warns him it will be unwise to refuse; with a sinking heart he takes the large piece of cake she has pointed out to him, and regards it as one might prussic acid. His courage fails him.

"Must I," he says, turning to her with a sudden and almost tearful change of tone, "must I eat all this?"

"Yes—all!" says Miss Blount, sternly.

Sadly, and in silence, he completes his task. But so slowly, that when it is finished he finds Mr.

Boer and Miss Gaunt have risen, and are making their adieux to their pretty hostess, and perforce he is bound to follow their example.

When he is gone, Roger gives way to speech of a somewhat virulent order.

"I must say I think Gower has turned out the most insufferable puppy I ever met," he says, an ill-subdued flash in his handsome eyes.

"Mr. Gower!" exclaims Dulce, in soft tones of wonder, and with a somewhat mocking smile. "Why, it is only a week or two ago since you told me he was your greatest chum or pal, or—I can't really remember at this moment the horrid slang word you used, but I suppose its English was 'friend.'"

"Fellows at school and fellows at college are very different from fellows when they are grown up and launched on their own hook," says Mr. Dare, with a frown.

"What an abominably arranged sentence," says Sir Mark, with his fine smile, coming to the rescue for the third time to-day. "I couldn't follow it up. How many fellows were at school?—and how many at college?—and how many were grown up? It sounds like a small army!"

At this Roger laughs, and moves away to the upper end of the room where Julia is sitting. Dulce

shrugs her wilful little shoulders, and taking up the huge white cat that lies on the rug at her feet, kisses it, and tells it in an undertone that it is a "dear sweet" and a "puss of snow," and that all the wide world is cross and ranky, and disagreeable, except its own lovely self.

She has just arrived at this uncomplimentary conclusion about mankind generally, when Dicky Browne, who is standing at one of the lower windows, says abruptly:

"I say; look at Quail and her new puppies. Who let them out?"

At this Miss Blount drops the white cat suddenly, and cruelly regardless of her indignant mew, rushes to catch a glimpse of the new pups; Roger rises precipitately from his chair, on the same purpose bent. As all the other windows are occupied, except the one nearest the fireplace, both he and Dulce make for it together.

Quail, the red setter, proud and happy, is marching past on the gravel outside, her two sons beside her. The yellowest puppy has purloined a bone from some unknown quarter, and is carrying it with him triumphantly. His brother, eyeing him furtively from time to time, is plainly filled with envy because of his good luck, and is inwardly consumed

with a desire to make the delicacy above-mentioned his own.

At length avarice conquers prudence; there is a snap, two snarls, and a violent tussle, during which both puppies roll over and over each other on the damp path, and finally, the mother, interfering, seizes the bone of contention as her own, and in canine language, desires the two culprits to follow her with hang-dog looks and lowered tails to their kennel.

"Ha, ha, ha!" says Roger, forgetful of everything but the pretty pups and their tiny war.

"Ha, ha, ha!" says Dulce, equally unmindful of the stormy past. "How sweet they looked, naughty things. And how they *did* bark and bite. Dr. Watts should have been here to see them."

"I wonder will they get that bone back?" says Roger, turning to her, all animosity forgotten in the pleasurable excitement of the moment.

"Let us come and see," exclaims she with considerable animation, and in the friendliest tone imaginable. She glances up at him from under her long lashes with one of her brightest and sunniest smiles, and moves a step nearer to him.

"We must run if we want to be in time for the finish," says Roger—"come."

He takes her hand, and together they move to-

wards the door. They are, apparently, as happy and as good friends as if no harsh words had ever passed between them.

"Going out now," says Julia, as they pass the low wicker chair in which she is lounging, "so late?"

"Don't be long, Dulce," says Portia, in her plaintive way. "I miss you when you are out of my sight."

"I shan't be any time," says Dulce.

"Mr. Gower said it was going to rain, and it is a long way to the yard," says Julia again. "Stay here, and keep dry."

"I suppose Gower is not infallible," says Roger, hastily. "I think it will not rain."

"I think so too," says Dulce, adorably; "and as for Mr. Gower, I only know one thing; I shall never give *him* any of my own cake again, because he looked just as if he was going to die, or have a tooth drawn, all the time he was eating it to-day."

Then they disappear, still hand-in-hand, in search of the refractory puppies, and Portia, turning to Sir Mark, says softly:

"What am I to think now? How is it with them? Have they——"

"Yes; quite that," says Sir Mark, airily. "All is forgotten; the storm is over—not even a breeze re-

mains. The delicate charms of two snarling puppies have put an end to strife—for the present. Let us be grateful for small mercies—*and* the puppies."

"It is very wonderful," says Portia, still showing some soft surprise.

CHAPTER XI.

"There's something in a flying horse."
PETER BELL.

"For of fortunes sharpe adversite,
The worst kind of infortune is this,
A man that hath been in prosperite
And it remember, whan it passed is!"
CHAUCER.

"WHERE are you going, uncle Christopher?" asks Dulce, as Sir Christopher enters the small drawing-room, booted and spurred as if for a long journey.

Portia, in the distance, is bending over an easel; Julia is forming some miraculous flower, that never yet was seen by land or sea, on a coarse towel, with some crewel wools; the Boodie is lying on her little fat stomach, drawing diligently with a slate and pencil; Dulce, charmingly idle, is leaning back in a lounging chair, doing nothing.

"To Warminster," says Sir Christopher. "What shall I bring you girls from that sleepy little town?"

"Something sweet," says Dulce, going up to him, and laying her soft arms lovingly round his neck.

"Like yourself," says Sir Christopher.

"Now that is sarcasm," says Miss Dulce, patting his fresh old cheek very fondly. "I meant chocolates, or burnt almonds, or even everton toffy, if all things fail."

"And what shall I bring the others?" asks Sir Christopher, laughing; "you have a sweet tooth, you naughty child, perhaps they haven't."

"*I* have," says Portia, turning round on her seat. "Bring us as much as ever you can."

"Burnt almonds are my chief delight," murmurs Julia, affectedly and somewhat absently, being sick with grief, because she cannot reconcile it to her conscience that the stem of an arum lily should be peacock blue.

"Bring some crackers," says the Boodie, suddenly warming into life, and so far condescending to notice Sir Christopher as to roll round her portly person until she lies prone upon her back. From this dignified position she eyes Sir Christopher magisterially. "*Real* crackers, mind," she says, severely, "that will say c-r-r-rack, and show fire! those last you brought"—contemptuously—"were a humbug!"

"Elizabeth!" exclaims her mother, in a would-be shocked tone—the Boodie rejoices in that lengthy name—"what *are* you saying?"

"The truth," says the Boodie, unflinchingly; "the last he brought were a reg'lar swindle—ask Jacky; why, they wouldn't go off even if you *stamped* on 'em."

She so plainly—by the severity of her glance—conveys to everyone the impression that she believes Sir Christopher on that last unfortunate occasion had purposely bought for them crackers beneath notice, that the poor old gentleman, though innocent of offence, feels himself growing warm beneath her relentless gaze.

"It wasn't my fault, my dear," he says, apologetically; "I quite meant them to go off. I did, indeed."

"Perhaps so. Take care, however, it doesn't occur again," says the Boodie, with so careful, though unconscious, an imitation of her mother's manner when addressing her maid, that they all laugh, whereupon she rolls back again to her former position, and takes no further notice of them.

Just at this moment Fabian enters the room.

"Going to drive to Warminster?" he asks his uncle.

"Yes."

"Not Bess, I hope?" alluding to a very objectionable young mare in the stables.

"Yes," says Sir Christopher again. "Why not?"

"She is utterly unsafe. About the worst thing in chestnuts I ever met. I took her out myself the other day—rode her straight from this to Grange; and, I confess, I should not care to do it again. Take one of the other horses, and let that beast lie quiet until you can get rid of her."

"Nonsense!" says Sir Christopher, scornfully; "I wouldn't part with her for any money. She is the greatest beauty this side of the county."

"Her beauty is her one point; for the rest, she is vindictive and ill-mannered."

"Don't do anything foolish, dearest," says Dulce, with her eyes large and frightened. "Do listen to Fabian."

"And let myself be conquered by a pettish chestnut, at my age," says Sir Christoper, lightly—he had been a famous horseman in his day. "My dear child, you don't understand, and there are moments when Fabian romances. To satisfy you, however, I shall take George with me."

"'Wilful man must have his way,'" quotes Fabian, with a slight shrug. "Before I go out, shall I look over those accounts with Slyme?"

"Where are you going?"

"To the warren, with the others, to have a few shots at the rabbits—they overrun the place."

"Very good. Just ask Slyme about the accounts. By-the-bye, he gets more irregular daily."

"More drunk, do you mean?" says Fabian. There are moments when his manner is both cold and uncompromising.

Portia regards him curiously.

"Yes! yes! Just so," says Sir Christopher, hastily. "But for the melancholy story that attaches itself to him—and that, of course, is some excuse for him—I really should not feel myself justified in keeping him here much longer."

"What story?" asks Portia.

"Oh! well; it all lies in a nutshell. It is an old story, too; one has so often heard it. A bad son—dissipated—in perpetual hot water. A devoted father. Then, one day, a very bad story comes, and the son has to fly the country. And then, sometime afterwards, news comes of his death. Slyme never saw him again. He broods over that, I think; at least, he has never been the same since the son, Matthew, left England. It was all a very unhappy business."

"For the father, perhaps. For the son, he had more than ordinary luck to die as soon as he did," says Fabian. He does not speak at all bitterly. Only hopelessly, and without heart or feeling.

"Nobody knows how old Gregory got him out of the country so cleverly," says Sir Christopher. "It was a marvel how he managed to elude the grasp of the law."

"He satisfied the one principal creditor, I suppose?" says Fabian, indifferently.

"Oh! impossible," says Sir Christopher. "It came to hundreds, you know; and he hadn't a farthing. Well, good-bye; I'm off. Expect me and the bonbons about dinner-hour."

He nods to Portia and Julia, who smile at him in return, and, kissing Dulce, quits the room.

Fabian, following him, goes on to the library; and, having desired one of the men to send the secretary, Slyme, to him, sits down at one of the tables and turns over leisurely the pages of accounts that lie there.

After a brief examination, he tells himself impatiently that they are somewhat muddled, or have, at least, been attended to in a most slovenly manner. He has just discovered a serious mistake in the row of figures that adorn the end of the second page, when the door opens slowly, and Gregory Slyme comes in.

"Wait one moment, Slyme," says Fabian, with-

out looking up from the figures before him. A moment passes in utter silence. Then, Fabian, still with his eyes upon the account, says somewhat sharply: "Why, it is altogether wrong. It has been attended to with extreme carelessness. Did you, yourself, see to this matter of Younge's?"

He waits, apparently for an answer—but none comes. Lifting his eyes he fixes them scrutinisingly upon the old man before him, and having fixed them, lets them rest there in displeased surprise.

Slyme, beneath this steady gaze, grows visibly uneasy. His eyes shift uncomfortably from one object in the room to another; his limbs are unsteady —the hand resting on the table near him is shaking. His face betrays vacancy mixed with a cunning desire to hide from observation the heaviness and sluggishness that is overpowering him.

"Speak," says Fabian, sternly and remorselessly —"you can frame an answer, I suppose."

The old man mutters something that is almost unintelligible, so thick and husky are his tones. His eyes grow more restless;—mechanically, and as though unconscious of the act, he leans his body stupidly against the bookcase near him.

"You are drunk," says Fabian, with slow scorn —"leave the room."

Having said this he turns again to his papers, as though from this moment contemptuously unaware of the other's presence.

Slyme attempts an explanation:

"You wrong me, sir," he says, in a thick uncertain voice—"I—I am ill—; my head is bad at times—I——"

"That will do," says Fabian, such ineffable disgust in his whole manner as makes the miserable besotted old wretch before him actually cower. "No more lies. I have spoken to you already twice this week—and—; do you know what hour it is?—twelve o'clock! you begin your day early."

"I assure you, sir"—begins Slyme again. But Fabian will not listen:

"Go," he says, briefly, with a disdainful motion of the hand, and in a tone not to be disobeyed. Slyme moves towards the door in his usual slouching fashion, but, as he reaches it, pauses, and for one instant lifts his heavy eyes, and lets them rest upon the young man at the distant table.

This one instant reveals his thoughts. In his glance there is fear, distrust, and, above and beyond all, a malignant and undying hatred—such a hatred as might project itself from the eyes of the traitor

upon his victim. There is too upon Slyme's face a contortion of the muscles, that it would be sacrilege to call a smile, that is revengeful, and somehow suggests the possibility that this man, however impotent he may now appear, has, in some strange fashion, acquired a hidden and terrible power over the young man, who a moment since had treated him with such scorn and contumely.

The old secretary's countenance for this fateful moment is one brilliant, if wicked phantasmagoria, in which the ghosts of long sustained thoughts appear and disappear, going from fear and its brother, hatred, to lasting revenge. Then all vanish; the usual soddened look returns to the man's face; he opens the door, and once more, instead of the evil genius he looked a second ago, a broken-down drunken old creature crosses the threshold, shambles over the hall, and is lost presently amongst the many passages.

* * * * * *

Meantime, *ennui* is reigning triumphantly in the drawing-room, more conspicuously in the case of Dulce.

"Hey-day!" she says, with a little idle yawn—"how I do wish everybody would not go out shooting, all at once. I think they might take it by turns.

But all men are selfish—they never consider how lonely we may be."

"Why should one miss them?" says Julia, who in her soul considers every moment unoccupied by the society of a man (that is a possible lover) as time mis-spent.

"I don't know," says Dulce, candidly—"I am only sure of this, that I want them always."

Portia says nothing.

"Well, certainly, at times they are amusing," says Mrs. Beaufort, as though just awaking to the fact that now and again one *can* find a man with some wit or humour in him—"and I honestly confess"—with a little laugh and a great assumption of candour—"that I wish even Stephen Gower would drop in now and help us to pass away an hour or two."

"*Even* Stephen Gower!" repeats Dulce. "Julia, what has that poor young man done to you, that you should speak thus meanly of him? *Even*, what an unkind word!"

"I don't believe I quite meant it, do you know," says Julia, relenting. "I like Stephen very much. By-the-bye, what do you think of him? I never yet heard you express an opinion, good, or bad, about him. Do it now."

Leaning back in her chair, Dulce slowly and thoughtfully raises her arms in the air, with her fingers tipping each other, until presently they fall indolently behind her head, where she lets them lie.

"Well, let me see," she says, lazily, "I think, perhaps, like Chaucer's man, he is a 'veray parfit gentil knight.'"

Portia lifts her eyes from her painting and turns them slowly upon her cousin; she regards her very silently for a moment or two, and then she smiles, and leaning forward opens her lips.

"'And of his port as meke as is a mayde,'" she says, mischievously, purposely choosing the same poet for her quotation that Dulce had taken for hers.

Miss Blount laughs.

"You, too, are severe upon our neighbour," she says, defending him more from obstinacy than from real desire to see justice done. "I confess he is at times a trifle too mild, but not effeminate, surely?"

"He is very handsome," says Portia, evasively.

"He has a charming mouth," says Dulce.

"I think you ought only to look at Roger's mouth," says Julia, prudishly, whereupon Dulce

shrugs her shoulders impatiently, and, turning, devotes herself for the next ten minutes to the small artist lying at her feet—an attention received by the imperturbable Boodie with the most exasperating unconcern.

THE afternoon wanes; day is sinking to its rest. Behind the tall dark firs "the great gold sun-god, blazing through the sky," may still be seen, but now he grows aweary, and would fain give place to his sister, the pale moon.

"The sweet keen smell—the sighing sound" of coming night is on the air. The restless ocean is rolling inland with a monotonous roar; there is scarcely sufficient breeze to ruffle the leaves of the huge chestnut that stands near one corner of the old house, not far from the balcony outside the drawing-room windows, where Mrs. Beaufort and the two girls are sitting.

The children are playing somewhere in the distance. Their sweet and merry voices come up to the balcony now and then, and mingle with the breath of descending night.

And now from beneath the fir trees two figures emerge, and come towards the stone steps where their hostess is sitting.

"Are you clean?" asks Dulce, with a charming

smile, leaning over the railings to see them better as they draw closer.

"To confess a horrid truth, I don't believe we are," says Stephen Gower, glancing up at her, and regarding his rough shooting coat somewhat ruefully. "Will that admission exclude us from Paradise?"

"Dulce," says Dicky Browne, who is the second of the two figures, "I'm worn out. I've been walking all day, a thing I very seldom do; I have been firing off an unlimited number of cartridges, without, I am bound to confess—I am, as experience has doubtless taught you, a remarkably truthful person—without any very brilliant consequences, and I feel that very little more fatigue will be my death. Have compassion on us. We faint, we die: show mercy and give us some tea and some cake. You're awfully hungry, Gower, aren't you?"

"Well, not very," says Mr. Gower, too occupied in his contemplation of Dulce's charming face to be quite alive to what is so plainly expected of him.

"Oh, nonsense! He is tremendously hungry," says Dicky Browne. "Let us up, Dulce, and we will sit out there on the balcony, and wont soil anything. Except gore, there isn't much staining about us."

"But that is worse than anything," says Dulce, with a shudder. "However, come up, and if you keep *very* far away, I daresay I shan't mind much."

"Hard conditions," says Gower, in a low tone.

So tea is got for them again, and the children, who always seem to *feel* when plum-cake is to be had, come trooping noisily up the steps to join uninvited in the festivities.

Great content follows, and, indeed, all is peace until something said by the Boodie creates a confusion that sweeps calm to the winds. She has ensconced herself on Mr. Gower's knee, without saying so much as "by your leave" or "with your leave," and now, raising one soft little dimpled hand to his chin, turns his face towards her own, and for a full minute regards him with silent curiosity.

"Well, is your Highness satisfied?" says Gower, feeling amused.

The Boodie takes no notice of this enquiry. She puckers up her smooth brows as if puzzled, and then says, slowly—

"I don't believe one word of it!"

"Of what?" says Gower. Everybody by this time is looking at the Boodie, and the Boodie is steadfastly regarding Stephen Gower.

"It wasn't true what she said," goes on the

Boodie, meditatively, "because you have hair on your lip. *Girls* don't have hair on their lips—do they?"

"Not as a general rule," says Dicky Browne. "There *have* been noble exceptions, but unhappily they are rare. Miss Gaunt is perhaps the only old girl down here who can boast of hirsute adornment, and the growth upon her upper lip is not to be despised. But then she belongs to the higher and more powerful class of females, in fact, as Wordsworth so touchingly expresses it, she

> 'Wears upon her forehead clear
> The freedom of a mountaineer.'

I always — mildly — think Wordsworth must have been acquainted with Miss Gaunt."

"Go on," says Stephen to the Boodie, who is still lost in thought. "You have not yet told me what it is you disbelieve."

"It was something Portia said," returns the Boodie, composedly.

"That *I* said! surely you are mistaken, darling," says Portia.

"No, I am not," persists the Boodie, in an unmoved tone.

"Stephen," again turning his face to hers, "are you 'meke'?"

At this word all the truth becomes at once known to Portia and Dulce. The Boodie had been in the room when they were discussing Stephen with her mother. She had heard everything. She is a little pitcher—she has long ears. Can nothing be done to stop her further speech?

"He is a very nice boy, but I'm not prepared to go as far as calling him meek," says Dicky Browne, who begins to scent mischief in the air. "Who applied that word to him?"

"I think it is time all you children ran away to nurse," says Julia, in answer to an agonised glance from both girls.

"It was Portia," says the Boodie to Dicky Browne, in her sweet innocent treble. "Dulce said first he was a 'knight,' and then Portia said he was a 'meek maid'; she said something, too, about 'port', but I don't think she meant uncle Christopher's port—I think she meant Stephen's."

Deadly silence follows this bomb shell. As Mr. Gower, only the day before, had been reading the "Canterbury Tales" for them in his very best old English style, it is impossible to believe the two quotations from them, used in the morning, are not now alive in his memory.

Gower colours, and looks questioningly at Dulce. His expression is not altogether one of chagrin. The

child had said, she, Dulce, had called him a knight —"a veray parfit gentil knight" it must have been. There is comfort, and even gladness in this thought; so much comfort that he even feels inclined to forgive Portia for comparing him to a "mayde." Still, some awkwardness is naturally felt by all—(except the Boodie, who yawns indifferently, and finally follows the other children up to the nursery)—and every one is vainly trying to think of some common place remark, that, when uttered, shall have the effect of restoring conversation once more into a safe channel, when an interruption occurs that puts chagrin and awkwardness out of their minds for the rest of the evening.

First upon the air the reports of two guns being fired off quickly, one after the other; then the quick flinty sound of a horse's galloping hoofs.

Nearer they come, and still nearer with that mad haste belonging to them, that suggests unmanageable fury in the brute breast; and as all on the balcony rise simultaneously and press forward to see what may be coming, Bess and the dog-cart turn the corner near the chestnut-tree, and dash onwards towards the lower lawn.

Sir Christopher, grim and as full of rage as the animal in whose power he now finds himself, is still holding the reins—but more for form's sake than

anything else, as he has no control whatever over the infuriated chestnut, that, with reddened nostrils, and foam-covered flanks, is rushing madly down the green slope.

A sudden rise in the velvet lawn, causing the dog-cart to sway rather much to one side, unseats the groom, who is flung somewhat heavily to the ground. Being fortunately, however, unhurt, he rises hastily, and runs frantically after the mare, as though in foolish hope, that he may yet overtake her and be of some service to his master. With a smothered exclamation, Gower and Dicky Browne dash down the balcony steps to join him in his vain pursuit.

Vain, indeed! At the lower end, by the long lawn, runs a river, small, but swift, and turbulent, that flows for two miles through park, and waving field, and glowing valley, to throw itself finally into the arms of the thirsty ocean.

Towards this the horse is rushing madly. Once on its bank, who shall tell what next may happen. There will be a mad bound—a crash—a cry, perhaps, that will pierce through all other sounds—and then—and Sir Christopher——.

As these thoughts force themselves upon the girls, they shudder, and involuntarily move closer to each other. Dulce covers her face with her hands, as though to shut out some dreadful sight, and a low

dry sob escapes her. Portia, deadly pale, but calm and wide-eyed, is clinging to the balcony rails, and is gazing in speechless fear at the chestnut, that every instant is bringing nearer to the fateful goal. Julia, from time to time emits short little shrieks of terror, she being the sort of person, who, in moments of peril, would be always safe to scream.

Onward flies the mare; Sir Christopher (as yet bolt upright in his seat, and apparently, from the back view they can get of him, still so possessed with rage as to be unconscious of fear) is trying hopelessly to manage her.

Nearer and nearer to the brink of the stream they draw; now they are within a few yards of it; soon, help will be of little use, and the panting groom and the two young men who are following him will only be in time to witness more closely the disaster. All seems, indeed, hopeless, when a man, springing from behind the thick laurel hedge that grows on the right, rushes forward, and, seizing Bess by the head by sheer force of mind and body, forces her upon her haunches.

"It is Fabian!" says Portia, in a voice sharp with fear. "Dulce!—Dulce!" there is positive agony in her tone.

Dulce, letting her hands fall from her face, looks

up. Julia forgets to scream; all three watch with intensest anxiety the scene being enacted below.

And now ensues a struggle between man and beast; a struggle sharp but short. The beast, frightened, or perhaps, with fury exhausted, it may be, compelled against its will to acknowledge the superior power of mind over matter—gives way, and after a good deal of prancing stands tolerably quiet, though still trembling from excitement and violent temper.

By this time the groom with Gower and Dicky Browne have joined them.

"Get out Sir Christopher," says the groom, in an agitated voice, the swift run having added to his anxiety.

"Not a bit of it," says Sir Christopher, indignantly, "I'll take her back to the stables, or——"

"Get down at once," says Fabian, in a quick decided tone. "Don't delay, she is dangerous still and may bolt again at any moment. Besides, you have had enough of it surely!"

"I'm not going to be conquered by any mare born," says the old Baronet, obstinacy setting in at this point; "what d'ye think I bred her for, eh? To be made a laughing stock for the county, I suppose, eh? Nothing of the sort. She shall own me as master if I die for it. Here, get out of my way all you, boys——"

It is plain Sir Christopher is as yet undaunted, though, in truth, there is danger still; the chestnut is flinging up her head in an uncertain, frightened fashion, scattering angry foam as she does so, and her eyes are showing more white than seemly.

Fabian, who is still holding the bridle with both hands, looks at his uncle earnestly, almost, it might be said, curiously.

"If you are bent on taking this brute round yourself, of course, I shall go with you," he says, indifferently. "Hold her head, George, for a moment."

Even as he speaks the mare moves uneasily, and, as the groom approaches, throws up her head impatiently, and in so doing touches Fabian's right arm somewhat roughly. In spite of his self-control he winces perceptibly.

"You are hurt," says Sir Christopher, anxiously. "How?—where?"

"This arm," says Fabian, touching the injured part lightly. "A mere scratch, no doubt, but it hurts. Nevertheless, if you persist, I daresay I shall be able to hold her in check with the other."

"Here, George, lead her home," says Sir Christopher, hurriedly, throwing the reins he still holds to the groom, and hastily descending from the dog-cart. "To drive, indeed, with an injured arm! stuff

and nonsense!" he says, severely. "Some people have no sense, eh? though I must say I believe that poor brute is maligned. But for those shots fired off just as I was entering the gates nothing would have happened."

"Roger and Sir Mark discharging their guns, I daresay," says Stephen; "awkward, they should have chosen just that moment to do it."

"Fate!" says Dicky Browne, solemnly.

Meantime Fabian has turned away and gone quickly in the direction of the house. Dulce, running down the balcony steps, goes up to him with a very white little face.

"Darling, how brave you were. I thought something dreadful was going to happen to you. It was a horrid moment. If that wicked Bess had persisted she might have thrown you down and killed you."

"Well, she didn't, you see," says Fabian, lightly —but he shrinks a little from her embrace, and moves so that she cannot touch his right arm. His eyes are fixed upon the balcony above, where Portia still stands, pale as an early snowdrop and thoroughly unnerved. There is, however, about her a certain calm that is part of her nature, and that, perhaps, in her very greatest emergency and in her bitterest hour of need would still be hers.

At this moment, however, Fabian so far wrongs

her as to attribute this inborn quietude to coldness and indifference. He turns again to Dulce.

"Take that terrified look off your face," he says, somewhat languidly, with a smile that is faintly bitter. "You should show more self-control. Take example by your cousin; see how composed she can be, and how sensible."

He smiles again, and indicates Portia by a glance. For an instant his eyes meet hers. Is he wrong in thinking she is even a shade paler now than she was a moment since? He is not sure; and he has not time given him to make the thought a certainty, as Miss Vibart, turning slowly, goes towards one of the drawing-room windows, and presently is lost to sight.

There was something in her eyes, in the hurried glance he got at them, that saddens Fabian. Almost forgetful of Dulce's presence, he walks away from her, and, having gained the house, goes moodily up the stairs towards his own room.

His soul is disquieted: an agony of unrest, that even in his first days of despair had not visited him, is on him now; a longing, a craving, for what he knows (ah! the deep grief of that!) can never be obtained.

Why had her soft eyes looked so reproachful a while ago? Why had she turned so quickly away

from him when he had spoken those few harsh words, for which he hates himself now?

Her pallor returns to him, and the fear in her large eyes. Surely he should have taken note of them first, and not of the calmness and seeming coldness and her utter composure.

And then a strange soft light comes into his face, as he remembers how sweet she looked standing there, half leaning over the balcony, and looking down on him—unworthy, pale, but full of beauty.

It may be that other women have been lovely in his eyes, but, surely, none have reached her standard. One, indeed, in the past years had appeared to him (though he had not loved her) as nearly perfect as a woman can be; but, now comparing her with Portia, as he has often done of late, she—the former beauty—had paled in comparison.

He has been reading some old book of late, and now, thinking of both women, a description in it of some ancient queen and one of her court comes to him as being applicable to the train of thought in which he is indulging.

"One, amongst other purposes, said unto them of late, that she (the queen) 'excelleth as far the duchess as the golden sun excelleth the silvern moon,' which appeareth in the gravity of her face. Thus say they that have seen them both."

As he reaches the corridor, and gains the threshold of his own room, a light step behind him, causing him to turn, he finds himself looking once again into Portia's eyes.

She is very pale still, and there is something pathetic about her mouth. Slowly she comes up to him, without uttering a word, until she is so close to him that she can touch him, if she will. Then she speaks:

"You wronged me just now," she says, in a low voice; "you had an evil thought about me! But not *now*, I think," regarding him earnestly. "You have gone over it all again in your own mind, and you understand now you misjudged me."

"You are quite right in all you say; I did misjudge you. I have discovered my error. You will forgive me?"

"I suppose so." She is looking down now, and is tapping the ground impatiently with her foot.

"You ought," says Fabian, quietly. "To misjudge one's neighbour is one of the commonest failings of mankind."

There is meaning in his tone. She acknowledges unwillingly the fact that she comprehends this meaning by a sign, silent but perceptible: she colours deeply, and still looking down, continues her tattoo upon the oaken flooring of the corridor.

"You are not very humble," she says at length, "even now, when you have had to demand my pardon."

"Am I not?" says Fabian, with a partly suppressed sigh. "I should be. Forgive me that, too, and——" He pauses to draw his breath quickly, as if in pain. At this she lifts her head, and something she sees in his expression tells her the truth.

"You are hurt," she says, hastily, going nearer to him. "Where?—how?"

There is deep, unrestrained anxiety in her tone.

"My arm," confesses Fabian, who is, indeed, suffering greatly, laying his left hand upon his right arm, high up above the elbow.

"Is it a sprain or a bruise?"

"A little of both, perhaps. I came upstairs just now to ring for Parkins to help me off with my coat and do something for me."

"Parkins!" says Portia, with fine contempt; "of what use is a man in a case like this. Why not ask Dulce——"

"Oh! it is really nothing; and you saw how frightened she was already. I had pity on her nerves."

"Then let me be Parkins for a few minutes," says Portia, with a little smile. "I used to be of great use to George" (her brother, Colonel Vibart)

"occasionally when he came to grief at football, or in the hunting field. Let me see if my hand has lost its cunning."

"You won't like it," says Blount, hesitating; "it will look nasty you know, and there will be blood, I think, and perhaps it will be better for me to——"

"This is my sitting-room," interrupts Portia, calmly, throwing open a door on the opposite side of the corridor. "Come in here, and let me see what has happened to you."

Fabian follows her obediently. It all seems to him something like a dream, that this girl, usually so listless, should now brighten into life, and grow energetic and anxious for his sake.

With gentle fingers she helps him to take off his coat, and, in a business like, very matter-of-fact fashion, unfastens the gold link at his wrist, and, though paling a little as she sees the blood upon his sleeve, resolutely rolls it up and lays bare the injured arm.

It is looking dark and swollen, and the skin has been knocked off it in several places. The flesh has been a good deal bruised, and altogether the wound is an ugly one without being in any way serious. In spite of her efforts to the contrary, she blanches perceptibly, and shudders, and lets her lids droop rather heavily over her eyes.

"You are unfit for this sort of work," says Fabian, angry with himself, as he marks her agitation. "It was unpardonable of me even to permit you to attempt it." He moves back from her, and tries his shirt sleeve once more over his injured arm.

"Ah! do not touch it," says Portia, hastily; "the sleeve will only rub against it and make it worse."

Involuntarily she lays her hand on his to prevent his covering the wound, and looks at him with a glance full of sympathy and entreaty. So standing, with her eyes large and dark with pity, and her soft white hand trembling upon his, she seems to him so far

> "Beyond all women, womanly.
> He dreads to think how he should fare
> Who came so near as to despair!"

A pang desolates his heart. Alas! is not despair the only portion that can be meted out for him! The joy and the gladness of living, and the one great treasure of all—the heart's love—that beautifies and refines all it touches, can never be his; never for him, while this shadow rests upon him, will there be home or "hearthstone," or that deeper, more perfected sense of fellowship that exists between two souls only.

And this girl, with her hand on his, and

> "With eyes like open lotus flowers
> Bright in the morning rain,"

looking straight up at him, with gentlest concern in her regard, how might it have been with him and her, if life had flowed in a pleasant stream, and no turbulent waves had come to disturb its calm and musical ripple?

How short have been his days of grace, how long must be his years of misery: just in the very opening of his life, in the silken morning of his youth, the blow had fallen, deadening his sky, and rendering all things grey.

In what a very little space, indeed, lie all our happy moments; even the most successful of us can count them one by one, as it might be, on the fingers of one hand; and how tardy, how wearying, are those where sorrow, and trouble, and despair hold their own.

"Ce qui nous charme s'en va, et ce qui fait peine reste. La rose vit une heure, et le cyprès cent ans."

Portia has gone into an inner room, and now returns with a basin and a sponge. Very gently (and as though afraid each movement may increase his pain) she bathes his arm, glancing up at him

every now and then to see if, indeed, she is adding to or decreasing his agony.

If the truth be told, I believe he feels no agony at all, so glad he is to know her touch, and see her face. When she has sponged his arm with excessive tenderness, she brings a cambric handkerchief, and tearing it into strips, winds it round and round the torn flesh.

"Perhaps that will do until Dr. Bland can see it," she says, hopefully. "At least tell me you are in less pain now, and that I have done you some small good."

"Small!" says Fabian.

"Ah! well," she says, lightly, "then I suppose I have succeeded, but you must promise me, nevertheless, that you will have a doctor to look at you."

Her tone is still exquisitely kind; but there is now a studied indifference about it that hurts him keenly. Perhaps in his surprise at this sudden change of manner he overlooks the fact that the difference *is* studied!

"I have given you too much trouble," he says, stupidly, in a leaden sort of way. "But, as you say, you have been successful, I feel hardly any pain now."

"Then I suppose I may dismiss you," she says,

with a frugal little smile, just glancing at the half-opened door. The nervousness, the sympathy is over, and she remembers how lost to social consideration is the man to whose comfort she has been contributing for the past twenty minutes.

"I have taken up too much of your time already," he says, in a frozen tone, and then he turns and goes toward the door. But, after a moment's reflection, he faces round again abruptly, and comes up to her, and stands before her with set lips, and eyes aflame. His nostrils are dilated, there is intense mental pressure discernible in every line of his face.

"I do not mistake you," he says, with slow vehemence; "I am not such a dullard that I should count your bare charity as friendship. You have succoured me, as you would of your grace, no doubt, have succoured the vilest criminal that walks the earth, were he in death or pain."

She has grown very pale, and is rather frightened, if her eyes speak truly.

"Now that the reaction has set in," he goes on, bitterly, "you believe you have demeaned yourself in that you have assisted one, who——"

"You are saying what is not true," she says, in a low but clear voice; speaking slowly, and with difficulty, because her lips are white and dry.

"Am I," exclaims he, passionately. "Say, if you can, that you believe me innocent of all guilt, and I will believe you!"

He pauses—she is silent. A terrible moment ensues, fraught with agony for Fabian, and still she makes no sign. Her hands, tightly clasped, are hanging before her; her head is turned aside; her eyes persistently seek the floor. As if every nerve in her body is strung to excess, she stands so motionless that she might almost be a statue cut in marble.

Her silence is painfully eloquent. Fabian, in an excess of passion, tears off the cambric bandages from his arm, and flings them at her feet.

"I will have none of your charity," he says, with pale lips; and, throwing wide the door, strides down the corridor, and is soon beyond recall.

When the last echo of his feet has died away Portia rouses herself, and, moving towards a low chair near the fireplace, sinks into it, and presses her hands convulsively against her heart.

Now that she is at last alone the excitement of the last hour begins to tell upon her. Her cheeks and lips, that up to this have been positively bloodless, now grow dyed with richest crimson, that is certainly not of this earth—earthy, as it gives no promise of health or youthful strength. She leans

back in her chair as if exhausted; and, in truth, in the fair shell that harbours her soul but very little power remains to battle with the varied thoughts that rise within her.

Scene by scene the events of the last hour spread themselves before her:—the maddened brute rushing violently over the soft smooth lawn to where the treacherous stream awaits him, running gently between its damp green banks—Sir Christopher's danger — Fabian's unexpected interference — the short, but terrible fear for him—and then the sudden fall from the extreme agony of suspense to comparative calm.

And yet, perhaps, all this does not haunt her so much as one or two other things, that, in reality, were of little moment. That time, for instance, when he—Fabian—stood beneath the balcony, and when he, with a glance, a half-spoken word, accused her of coldness and indifference. He had condemned her all too willingly. But this was only fair, no doubt. Had not she, in her innermost heart, condemned him, unheard, unquestioned.

And what was it he had said to Dulce? "Take example by your cousin; see how sensible *she* can be," or something like that. Sensible! When this terrible pain was tugging at her heart strings, and prolonged nervousness had made speech impossible.

And why had he said "*your* cousin," instead of "our cousin?" Was it that he did not care to claim kinship with her, or because—because—he did not count himself worthy—to——

Again she raises her hand, and presses it with undue force against her left side. She is unhappy and alone, and full of a vague uncertainty.

"Each substance of a grief hath twenty shadows," and all the shadows of her grief seem now to hem her in, and encompass her on every side. The old troublesome pain in her heart, that drove her from the dissipations of town life to seek a shelter in the quiet country, returns to her again. At this moment the pain of which I speak grows almost past endurance. A faint, grey pallor supersedes the vivid carmine of awhile ago. She sighs with evident difficulty, and sinks back heavily amongst her cushions.

CHAPTER XII.

"Friendship is constant in all other things,
Save in the office and affairs of love."
MUCH ADO ABOUT NOTHING.

"I SHOULD think if we are going to give our dance at all, it ought to be soon," says Dulce, with a shrug and a somewhat listless little yawn.

"So we ought," says Dicky Browne, briskly. It seems the most natural thing in the world that he should use the first person plural, and that he should appear to be the chief promoter of the dance in question. "We've been talking of it a considerable lot, you know," he goes on, confidentially, "and they will all think it a dodge on your part if you don't give it within the next fortnight."

"A dodge!" says Miss Blount, very justly incensed. "What dodge?"

"Well, look here," says Dicky—"there once was a fellow——"

He breaks off at this interesting juncture, and, fixing his glass in his best eye, stares at a figure coming slowly towards them from the house. They

all follow his gaze, and find themselves criticising the approaching form in a vague, surprised fashion.

"Great hat! look at Julia!" says Dicky, at last, giving way to speech that will not be repressed. The exclamation is quite in keeping with the scene. Julia, in a head gear of the style usually described as a Rubens, of the very largest description, comes simpering up to them, filled with the belief that now, if ever, she is looking her very best. "Great" *is* the word for it. She is indeed all that.

"My dear Julia, where have you been?" says Dulce, ignoring the hat.

"Searching every room in the house for that last book of Ouïda's," says Julia, promptly, who has in reality been posing before a mirror in her own room, crowned with the Rubens. "I'm always losing my things, you know—and my way; my boat, for example, and my train, and my umbrella." She is plainly impressed with the belief that she is saying something smart, and looks conscious of it.

"Why don't you add your temper," says Dicky Browne, with a mild smile—which rather spoils the effect of her would-be smartness.

"We were talking about our ball," says Dulce, somewhat quickly. "Dicky seems to think we shall

lose caste in the neighbourhood if we put it off much longer."

"You'll create ill feeling," says Mr. Browne. "The Stanley girls have new gowns, and they want to show them. They'll say nasty things about you."

"That's your second hint on that subject," says Sir Mark. "Get it out, Dicky, you are dying to say something. What was it you were going to say a few minutes ago about some fellow who—?"

"Who for seven years was going to give a ball, and was asked everywhere on the strength of it. His friends hoped against hope, don't you see, but nothing ever came of it. At the end of the seven years he was as far off it as ever."

"And what did his friends do to him then?" asks Julia, who is one of those people who always want *more* than enough.

"Deponent sayeth not," says Mr. Browne. "Perhaps it was too dark a tale for publication. I suppose they either smote him between the joints of his harness till he died, or else they fell upon him in a body and rent him in pieces."

"What nonsense you can talk at times," says Mrs. Beaufort, mindful of his speech of a few moments ago.

"Not I," says Dicky Browne.

It is about four o'clock, and already the shadows are lengthening upon the grass, the soft, cool grass upon which they are all sitting beneath the shade of the huge chestnut trees, that fling their branches in all directions, some east, some west, some heavenwards.

A little breeze is blowing towards them sweet essences of pine-wood and dark fir. Above in the clear sky the fleecy clouds assume each moment a new form—a yet more tender colour—now pale blue, now grey, now a soft pink that verges upon crimson. Down far in the hollows a white mist is floating away, away, to the ocean, and there, too, can be seen (playing hide and seek amongst the great trunks of the giant elms) the flitting forms of the children dancing fantastically to and fro.

The scent of dying meadow-sweet is on the air, and the hush and the calm of evening.

"Dulce, command us to have tea out here," says Sir Mark, removing his cigarette from his lips for a moment.

"Dear Dulce, yes—that will be sweet," says Portia, who is very silent and very pale and very beautiful to-day.

"Dicky, go and tell someone to bring tea here directly," says Dulce; "and say they are to bring

peaches for Portia, because she loves them, and say anything else you like for yourself."

"Thanks; Curaçoa will do me very nicely," says Dicky, with all the promptitude that distinguishes him.

"And Maraschino," suggests Sir Mark, in the mildest tone.

"And just a suspicion of brandy," puts in Roger, almost affectionately. Overpowered by their amiability and their suggestions, Dicky turns towards the house.

"I fly," he says. "Think of me till my return."

"Do tell them to hurry, Dicky," says Dulce, anxiously. "They are always so slow. And tell them to bring lots of cake."

"You shall have it all in a couple of shakes," says Mr. Browne, encouragingly, if vulgarly.

"What's that?" asks Dulce, meaning reproof. "It isn't English, is it? How soon will it be?"

"Oh—half a jiff," returns he, totally unabashed.

Presently tea is brought, and they are all happy, notably Dicky, who walks round and into the cakes with unceasing fervour.

"By-the-bye, I wonder Stephen hasn't been here to-day," says Julia, addressing no one in particular.

"Something better to do, perhaps," says Portia.

"Yes—where *can* he be?" says Dulce, waking into sudden animation. "'Something better to do?' Why, what could that be?"

"Writing sonnets to your eyebrow," answers Roger, in an unpleasant tone.

"How clever you are!" retorts she, in a tone even more unpleasant, letting her white lids fall until they half-conceal the scorn in her eyes. *Only* half!

"He is such a gaol bird—I beg his pardon, a town bird," says Sir Mark, lazily, "that I didn't think anything could keep him in the country so long. Yet, he doesn't *look* bored. He bears the solitary confinement very well."

"There is shooting, isn't there?" suggests Portia.

"Any amount of it," says Dicky; "but that don't solve the mystery. He couldn't shoot a haystack flying, not if his life depended on it. It's suicide to go out with him! He'd as soon shoot you or me as anything else. I always say the grouse ought to love him, because I don't believe he knows the barrel of his gun from the stock."

"How perfectly dreadful," exclaims Julia, who always takes everything *au grand sérieux*.

"There is other game in the country besides grouse," says Roger, in a peculiar tone.

"I daresay he can't bear to leave that dear old

house now he has got into it," says Dulce; "it is so lovely—so quaint—so——"

"Now, is it?" asks Dicky Browne, meditatively; "I've seen nicer, I think. I always feel, when there, as if everything, ceilings, roof and all were coming down on my unfortunate head."

"But it is so old, so picturesque—a perfect dream, *I* think," says Dulce, rather affectedly.

"It isn't half a bad place, but not to be compared to The Moors, surely," says Sir Mark, gently, looking with some reproof at Dulce,—reproof the spoiled child resents—The Moors is Roger's home. "I think The Moors one of the most beautiful places in England."

"And one of the draughtiest," says Miss Blount, ungraciously. "I was there once. It was a year ago. It occurred to me, I remember, that the sun had forgotten it; indeed, I had but one thought all the time I stayed."

"And that was?" asks Roger, defiantly.

"How to get away from it again as soon as possible."

"I am sorry my old home found such disfavour in your sight," says Roger, so quietly that remorse wakes within her breast, bringing with it, however, no good result, rather adding fuel to the flame that has been burning brightly since breakfast time. His

rebuke is so abominably mild that it brings Miss Blount to the very verge of open wrath.

"I think Stephen such a dear fellow," says Julia, at this critical juncture. "So—er—well read, and that."

"Yes; though, I think, I have known better," says Sir Mark, looking at Dulce.

"Poor Mr. Gower," says that young lady, airily; "everyone seems determined to decry him. What has he done to everybody, and why should comparisons be drawn? There *may* be better people, and there may be worse; but—I like him."

"Lucky he," says Roger, with a faint but distinct sneer, his temper forsaking him; "I could almost wish that I were he."

"I could almost wish it, too," says Dulce, with cruel frankness.

"Thank you." Roger by this time is in a very respectable passion, though nobody but he and Dulce have heard the last three sentences. "Perhaps," he says, deliberately, "it will be my most generous course to resign in favour of——"

"More tea, Portia?" interrupts Dulce, very quickly, in a tone that trembles ever so slightly.

"No, thank you. But, Dulce, I want you near me. Come and sit here."

There is anxiety, mixed with entreaty, in her

tone. She has noticed the anger in Roger's face, and the defiance in Dulce's soft eyes, and she is grieved and sorry for them both.

But, Dulce, who is in a very bad mood indeed, will take no notice of either the entreaty or the grief.

"How can I?" she says, with a slow lifting of her brows. "Who will give anybody any tea, if I go away from this? And——" here she pauses, and her eyes fix themselves upon a break in the belt of firs low down, at the end of the lawn. "Ah," she says, with a swift blush, "you see I shall be wanted at my post for a little while longer, because —here is Mr. Gower, at last!"

The "at last" is intolerably flattering, though it is a question if the new comer hears it. He is crossing over the soft grass, his hat in his hand, his eyes dark and smiling. He looks glad, expectant, happy.

"What superfluous surprise," says Roger to Dulce, with even a broader sneer than his last. "He always *is* here, isn't he!"

"Yes; isn't it good of him to come," says Miss Blount, with a suspicious dulness—Stephen has not yet come quite close to them. "We are always so wretchedly stupid here, and he is so charming, and so good to look at, and always in such a perfect

temper!" As she finishes her sentence, she turns her large eyes full on her *fiancé*.

Roger, muttering something untranslatable between his teeth, moves away, and then Gower comes up, and Dulce gives him her hand and her prettiest smile, and presently he sinks upon the grass at her feet, and lies there in a graceful position that enables him to gaze without trouble upon her piquante face. He is undeniably handsome, and is very clean limbed, and has something peculiar about his smile that takes women as a rule.

"How d'ye do?" he says to Roger presently, when that young man comes within range, bestowing upon him a little nod. Whereon Roger says the same to him in a tone of the utmost *bonhomie*, which, if hypocritical, is certainly very well done, after which conversation once more flows smoothly onwards.

"What were you doing all day?" asks Dulce of the knight at her feet, throwing even kinder feeling than usual into her tone, as she becomes aware that Roger's eyes are fixed upon her.

"Wishing myself here," replies Gower, with a readiness that bespeaks truth.

"What a simple thing to say," murmurs Dulce, with a half-smile, glancing at him from under her long lashes. "But how difficult to believe. After

all," with a wilful touch of coquetry, "I don't believe you ever *do* mean anything you say."

"Don't you?" says Gower, with an eagerness that might be born of either passion or amusement. "You wrong me then. And some day—some day, perhaps, I shall be able to prove to you that what I say I mean." Then, probably, the recollection of many things comes to him, and the quick warm light dies out of his eyes, and it is with an utter change of tone and manner he speaks next.

"Now tell me what you were doing all day," he says, lightly.

"Not very much; the hours dragged a little, I think. Just now, as you came to us, we were discussing—" it is almost on her lips the word "you," but she suppresses it in time, and goes on easily—"a dance we must give as soon as possible."

"An undertaking down here, I suppose?" says Gower, doubtfully; "yet a change after all. And, of course, you are fond of dancing," with a passing glance that is almost a caress at her little svelte figure.

"Yes, very; but I don't care about having a ball here." She says this with a sigh; then she pauses, and a shade saddens her face.

"But why?" asks he, surprised.

"There are many reasons—many. And you

might not understand," she says, rather confusedly. She turns her face away from his, and in doing so meets Portia's eyes. She has evidently been listening to what Dulce has just said, and now gives back her cousin's gaze as though against her will. After a moment she slowly averts her face, as if seeking to hide the pallor that is rendering even her lips white.

"Both my evening suits are unwearable," says Dicky Browne, mournfully. "I shall have to run up to town to get some fresh things." He says this deprecatingly, as though utterly assured of the fact that every one will miss him horribly.

"You won't be long away, Dicky, will you?" says Roger, tearfully; at which Dulce, forgetful for the instant of the late feud, laughs aloud.

"I can't think what's the matter with me," says Dicky, still mournful; "my clothes don't last any time. A month seems to put 'em out of shape, and make 'em unwearable."

"No wonder," says Sir Mark, "when you get them made by a fellow out of the swim altogether. *Where* does he live? Cheapside or Westbourne Grove?"

"No; the Strand," says Mr. Browne, to whom shame is unknown, "if you mean Jerry."

"Dicky employs Jerry because his name is

Browne," says Roger. "He's a hanger-on of the family, and is popularly supposed to be a poor relation, a sort of country cousin. Dicky proudly supports him in spite of public opinion. It is very noble of him."

"The governor sent me to him when I was a young chap—for punishment, I think," says Dicky mildly, "and I don't like to give him up now. He is such a fetching old thing, and so conversational, and takes such an interest in my nether limbs."

"Who are you talking of in such laudatory terms?" asks Dulce, curiously, raising her head at this moment.

"Of Jerry—my tailor," says Dicky, confidentially.

"Ah! A good man, but—er—tiresome," says Julia, vaguely, with a cleverly suppressed yawn; she is evidently under the impression that they are discussing Jeremy Taylor, *not* the gentleman in the Strand.

"*Is* he good?" asks Dicky, somewhat at sea. "A capital fellow to make trousers, I know, but for his morality I can't vouch."

"I am speaking of the divine Jeremy Taylor," says Julia, very justly shocked at what she believes to be levity on the part of Dicky. "*He* didn't make trousers, he only made maxims!"

"Poor soul!" says Mr. Browne, with heartfelt

pity in his tone, to whom Jeremy Taylor is a revelation, and a sad one. "Did he die of 'em?"

Of this frivolous remark, Julia deigns to take no notice. And indeed they are all too accustomed to Mr. Browne's eccentricities of style to spend time trying to unravel them.

"You haven't yet explained to me the important business that kept you at home all day," Dulce is saying to Mr. Gower. She is leaning slightly forward, and is looking down into his eyes.

"Tenants and a steward, and such like abominations," he says, rather absently. Then, his glance wandering to her little white slender fingers that are idly trifling with her fan, "By the bye," he goes on, "the steward—Mayne, you know—can write with both hands. Odd, isn't it? just as well with his left as with his right."

"A rather useless accomplishment, I should think."

"I don't know. It occurred to me we should all learn how to do it in case we should break our arms, or our legs or anything."

"What on earth would our legs have to do with it," says Miss Blount, with a gay little laugh, which he echoes.

"Oh! well, in case we should sprain our right wrists, then. When Mayne went away I tried if *I*

could make use of my left hand, and succeeded rather well. Look here, you hold your hand like this."

"It sounds difficult," says Dulce, doubtfully.

"It isn't though, really. Will you try?" Taking a pencil and an envelope from his pocket, he lays the latter on her knee, and hands her the former. "Now let me hold your hand just at first to guide you, and you will soon see how simple it is. Only practice is required."

"It will take a good deal of practice and a good deal of guidance, I shouldn't wonder," says Miss Blount, smiling.

"That will be my gain," returns he in a low tone. As he speaks he lays his hand on hers, and directs the pencil; so the lesson begins; and so it continues uninterrupted for several minutes; Dulce is getting on quite smoothly; Mr. Gower is plainly interested in a very high degree, when Roger, coming up to them, lays his hand lightly upon Dulce's shoulder. He is still passionately angry, and almost unable to control himself. To see Dulce's fingers clasped by those of Gower's, however innocently, has fired his wrath, and driven him to open expression of his displeasure.

"If you have forgotten how to write, Dulce," he says in a low, strained voice, "I daresay it will be

possible to find a master to re-instruct you. In the meantime, why trouble Gower?"

"Does it trouble you, Mr. Gower?" asks she, sweetly, looking straight at Stephen and ignoring Roger.

"Need I answer that?" responds he, flushing warmly, and in his turn ignoring Dare.

"Then you need not worry yourself to get me a master, Roger," says Dulce, still quite sweetly. "It is very good of you to wish to take such trouble about me, but you see I have got one already."

"Not a master—a slave!" says Gower, impulsively. There's such evident and earnest meaning in his tone that she colours violently, and with a rather open manifestation of shrinking, withdraws her hand from his clasp; the pencil falls to the ground, but Roger has turned aside, and this last act on her part is unseen by him.

"Is anything the matter with Roger?" says Gower, slowly.

"What should be the matter with him?" asks she, coldly.

"Do you remember what we were reading yesterday? Do you remember even one particular line? It comes to me now. 'So loving jealous.' You recollect?"

"No; and even if I did, what has it to do with Roger?"

"Nothing—*perhaps*." There is a small fine smile around his lips that incenses her—she scarcely knows why.

"Then what does your quotation mean?"

"Nothing, too, no doubt. Shall we go on with our lesson?"

"No, I am tired of it," she says, petulantly. "I like nothing, I think, for very long." She has grown somewhat restless, and her eyes are wistful. They are following Roger, who has thrown himself at Portia's feet.

"Are your friendships, too, short-lived?" asks Gower, biting his lips. You can see that he is lounging on the grass, and at this moment, having raised his hand, it falls again, by chance upon her instep.

Remorse and regret have been companions of her bosom for the past minute, now they quicken into extreme anger. Pushing back the garden chair on which she has been sitting, she stands up and confronts the stricken Gower with indignant eyes.

"Don't do that again," she says, with trembling lips. Her whole attitude—voice and expression—are undeniably childish, yet she frightens Gower very nearly out of his wits.

"I beg your pardon," he stammers, eagerly, growing quite white. "I must *insist* on your understanding I did not mean it. How could you think it? I——"

At this instant Roger laughs. The laugh comes to Dulce as she stands before Gower grieved and angry and repentant, and her whole face changes. The grief and the repentance vanish, the very anger fades into weariness.

"Yes, I believe you—I was foolish—it doesn't matter," she says, heavily; and then she sinks into her seat again, and taking a small volume of selected poetry from a rustic table at her elbow, throws it into his lap.

"Read me something," she says, gently.

"What shall I select?" asks Stephen, puzzled by the sudden change in her manner, but anxious to please her.

"Anything. It hardly matters; they are all pretty," she says, disconnectedly, and so indifferently that he is fairly piqued; his reading being one of his strongest points; and taking up the book he opens it at random and begins to read in a low sweet rhyming voice that certainly carries its own charm.

Dulce, in spite of herself, is by degrees drawn to listen to it; yet though the words so softly spoken

attract her and chain her attention, there is always a line of discontent around her lovely mouth, and a certain angry petulance within her eyes and in the gesture with which she furls and unfurls her huge black fan.

Dicky Browne, who has confiscated all the cake, and is therefore free to go where he lists, has drawn near to her, and, under cover of a cigarette, is pretending to be absorbed in the poetry. Gower has fallen now upon Gray's Elegy in a Churchyard, and is getting through it most effectively. All the others have grown silent, either touched by the beauty of the dying daylight, or the tender lines that are falling on the air. When at length Stephen finishes the poem, and his voice ceases to break the stillness of the coming eve, no one stirs, and an utter calm ensues. It is broken by the irrepressible Julia.

"What a charming thing that is," she says, alluding, they presume, to the elegy. She pauses here, but no one takes her up or seems to care to continue the praise of what is almost beyond it. But Julia is not easily discouraged.

"One can almost see the gaunt trees," she says, sentimentally, "and the ivied walls of the old church, and the meadows beyond, and the tinkling of tiny bells, and the soft white sheep as they move perpetually onward in the far, far distance."

She sighs, as though overcome by the perfect picture she has so kindly drawn for their benefit.

"I wish to goodness she would move on herself," says Dicky Browne. "It is enough to make poor Gray turn in his grave."

"I think she describes rather prettily, and quite as if she meant it," says Portia, softly.

"Not a bit of it," growls Dicky; "she *don't* mean it; she couldn't. It's all put on—regular plaister! She doesn't feel it; she knows as much about poetry as I do."

"You underrate yourself, my darling boy," says Roger, fondly.

"Oh! you get out," says Mr. Browne, most ungratefully.

"I think to be able to read *really* well is an intense charm," goes on Julia, glancing sweetly at Stephen. "If one had only someone to give one a kindly hint now and then about the correct intonation and emphasis and that, it would be a regular study of course. I really have half a mind to go in for it."

"So glad she has at last arrived at a just appreciation of her own powers," says Dicky, *sotto voce*. "I should think she has just half a mind and no more to do anything with."

He is hushed up; and then Stephen goes on

again choosing passages from Shakespeare this time, for a change, while silence once more reigns.

Roger is looking sulky and unkindly critical. Sir Mark has been guilty of a small yawn or two. Julia, in spite of the most heroic efforts to the contrary, is openly and disgracefully sleepy. Portia's eyes are full of tears. Dicky Browne, who is tired of not hearing his own voice, and whose only belief in the divine William is, that he gave him "a jolly lot of trouble in his schooldays," is aweary, and is only waiting an opportunity to cut in and make himself heard, in spite of all opposition.

It comes—the opportunity—and Dicky seizes it. Mr. Gower is at his very best. He has thrown his whole soul into his voice, and is even himself wrapt up in the piece he has before him.

"'Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown,'" his voice rings out clear and full of melancholy prophecy; it is a voice that should have impressed any right-minded individual, but Dicky's mind is below par.

"I should think he'd lie considerably more uneasy without it," he says, cheerfully. "He'd feel like being scalped, wouldn't he? And get dreaming about Comanches and tomahawks and Fenimore Cooper, eh?"

For once Dicky scores. The men have grown

tired of Mr. Gower's performance, and hail the interruption with delight. Roger turns on his side and laughs aloud. This attention, so unprecedented on his part, fills Dicky's soul with rapture. He instantly bestows upon his supporter a smile rich with gratitude; yet perhaps it is not Mr. Browne's wit alone that has called forth such open manifestation of mirth from Roger. There is, I think, just the faintest touch of malice in his merriment.

And then the faithless Dulce laughs too; the most musical ringing little laugh in the world, but none the less galling for all its sweetness. It is the last straw. Mr. Gower suppressing a very natural inclination, lays the book down gently on the grass beside him (he would have given anything to be able to fling it far from him), and makes some casual remark about the excessive beauty of the evening.

And, indeed, it is beautiful; all down the western slope of the fir crowned hill, the fading rays of light still wander, though even now in the clear heavens the evening star has risen, and is shining calm and clear as a soul entered on its eternal rest.

"Will you not read us something else?" says Dulce, feeling a little ashamed of herself.

"Some other time," returns he.

"Dicky rather took the sentiment out of it," says Roger, still maliciously mirthful. "I hardly think

he and the Swan of Avon would be congenial souls."

"Well, I don't know," says Sir Mark, lazily. "We have been taught that extremes meet, you see."

"Dicky, how can you stand their impertinence?" asks Dulce, gaily. "Assert yourself, I entreat you."

"There is such a thing as silent contempt," says Mr. Browne, untouched by their darts. "There is also a passage somewhere that alludes to an 'unlettered small-knowing soul'; I do not desire to quote it in this company. Let us return to the immortal Bill."

But they are all laughing still, and in the face of laughter, it is difficult to get back to tragedy. And so no one encourages Gower to continue his work, and this, in despite of the fact that the light growing as it is towards the gloaming, seems in keeping with dismal tales and softly-mouthed miseries.

Every moment the evening star grows brighter, gaining glory as the day declines. The mist has died away into the ocean, the breeze has sunk to slumber, only the song of many birds hymning themselves to roost amongst the quiet thickets disturbs the tranquillity of the air.

Dead leaves that speak of autumn and coming dissolution float toward the loiterers on the lawn, and, sinking at their feet, preach to them a lesson

of the life that lasts not, and of that other life that in all its splendour may yet dawn upon them.

A soft and sullen roar from the ocean makes the silence felt. The sea, clothed round with raiment of white waves, and rich with sparkling life, dashing itself along the beach, breathes a monotonous murmur that wafts itself inland and falls with vague music upon the listening ear. Thoughts arise within the breast, born of the sweet solemnity of the hour, and the sadness that belongs to all life—but in this changeable world nothing lasts, and presently seeing something in the lawn below that puzzles her sight, Julia says, quickly: "What are the moving forms I see down there?"

"Only the children undulating," says Mr. Browne, promptly.

"What?" says Sir Mark.

"I have said!" returns Dicky.

"There is surely something besides children," says Portia, trying to pierce the gathering darkness. "See, what is that coming towards us now?"

They all peer eagerly in the direction of the firs, from between which a flying mass may be seen emerging, and approaching rapidly to where they are all seated.

"It is only Jacky on his fact," says Mr. Browne,

at length, after a careful examination of this moving form.

"On what?" asks Roger, curiously.

"His fact," repeats Dicky, unmoved.

"What's that?" asks Jacky's mamma, somewhat anxiously,—if a careless, it must be to her credit said, that Julia is a very kindly mother, and is now rather upset by Mr. Browne's mysterious declaration.

"You ought to know; you gave it to him," declares he. "He's sitting on it anyhow."

"Really, Dicky, we must ask you to explain yourself," says Sir Mark, with dignity.

"Why, it's only a donkey," says Dulce, "and Jacky is riding him."

"Just so," says Mr. Browne, equably; "and a very large donkey too; I always call them facts because they are stubborn things. At least, that one is, because I rode it yesterday—at least I tried to—and it behaved very ill indeed. It's—it's a very nasty animal, and painfully unamiable."

"What did it do to you?" asks Julia, who is again in secret fear about her first-born, who every moment draws more near.

"Well, I got on him, incited thereto by Jacky and the Boodie, and when I had beaten him unceasingly for a full quarter of an hour, in the vain hope

of persuading him to undertake even a gentle walk, he turned treacherously to the right, and squeezed my best leg against the garden wall. I bore it heroically, because I knew the Boodie was regarding me sternly, but I could have wept bitterly; I don't know if all walls are the same, but the *garden* wall hurts very much."

"I wonder where Dicky gets all his stories," says Dulce, admiringly.

"He evolves them out of his inner consciousness," replies Sir Mark.

Meantime, Jacky draws nearer and nearer. He advances on the donkey—and on them, at a furious pace. Surely, never was a lazy ass so ridden before! Perhaps those watching him are under the impression that when closer to them, he will guide his steed to their right or to their left, or at least steer clear of them in some way, but if so they are mistaken.

Jacky is in his element. He gallops wildly up to them, with arms and legs flying north and south, and his cap many miles behind. That hidden sense, that tells the young and artless one that the real meaning of all fun is to take some one by surprise and frighten the life out of him, is full upon him now.

"Out of my way," he shrieks, in frenzied ac-

cents almost, as he bears down upon them. "Out of my way, I say, or he'll kill you; I can't pull him in. He is running away with me!"

With this the wily young hypocrite gives the donkey a final kick with his right heel, and dashes ungallantly into the very midst of them.

The confusion that follows is all his heart can desire. Great indeed is the rout. Camp chairs are scattered broadcast; shawls strew the lawn; Julia flies to the right, Dulce to the left; Portia instinctively finds refuge behind Dicky Browne, who shows great gallantry on this memorable occasion, and devotes himself to the service of the frail and weak. Indeed, it is on record, that in the height of his zeal, he encircled Portia's waist with his arm, and cried aloud to the foe to "come on," as he waited for victory or death.

Jacky flies past, and is presently seen urging on his wild career in the little glade that leads to the wood. Once more they breathe, and order is restored, to Gower's deep regret, as he has managed, in the *mêlée*, to seize hold of Dulce's hand, and in an abstracted fashion has held it ever since.

"That boy deserves a sound whipping," says Sir Mark, indignantly, who is, nevertheless, a sworn friend of the graceless Jacky.

"You hear, Julia; you are to whip him at once?" says Roger.

"Whip him!" says Mrs. Beaufort, resentfully. "Indeed I shall not. I never whipped one of them in my life, and I never shall."

"You'd be afraid," says Dicky Browne. "You should see Julia when the Boodie attacks her; she literally goes into her boots, and stays there. It is, indeed, a pitiable exhibition. By-the-bye, does anybody want dinner; because, if so, he may as well go and dress. It is quite half-past six."

CHAPTER XIII.

"A vague unrest
And a nameless longing filled her breast."

TIME, as a rushing wind, slips by, and brings us Dulce's ball. The night is lovely and balmy as any evening in the summer months gone by, though now September shakes the leaves to their fall. A little breeze sweeps up from the ocean, where the "lights around the shore" show mystical and bright; whilst overhead, all down the steeps of heaven, myriad stars are set, to flood the sleeping world with their cold clear beauty.

Upon the walls, and all along the balconies, lie patches of broken moonshine; and in the garden the pale beams revel and kiss the buds until they wake; and "all flowers that blow by day come forth, as t'were high noon."

In the library the lamps are lowered. Nobody has come downstairs yet, and the footman, giving the last lingering touch to the little sweet gossiping fire

that warns them of winter's approach, turns to leave the room. On the threshold, however, he stands aside to let Miss Vibart enter.

She is dressed in a white satin gown, creamy in shade, and rather severe in its folds. Some pale water lilies lie upon it, as though cast there by some lucky chance, and cling to it lovingly, as if glad to have found so soft a resting place. There is no flower in her hair, and no jewels anywhere, except three rows of priceless pearls that clasp her slender throat. Throwing her gloves and fan upon the centre table, she walks slowly to a mirror, and examines herself somewhat critically.

As if ungratefully dissatisfied with the lovely vision it presents to her, she turns away again with an impatient sigh, and trifles absently with a paper knife near her. There is a discontented line about her mouth, a wistful, restless expression in her eyes. She moves slowly, too, as if gladness is far from her, and shows in every glance and movement a strange amount of languor.

As though her thoughts compel her to action, she walks aimlessly from place to place; and now, as if she is listening for something to come; and now, as if she is trying to make up her mind

to take some step from which she shrinks in secret.

At last, drawing her breath with a sudden quickness, born of determination, she opens a drawer in a cabinet, and taking from it a little volume in the Tauchnitz binding, she opens the library door, and, turning to the right, walks swiftly down the corridor.

From out the shadow a figure advances towards her, a figure bent and uncomely, that tries in vain to avoid the meeting with her, and to get out of sight before recognition sets in.

It is the old man Slyme. As she sees him there returns to Portia the memory of many other times when she has met him here in this corridor, with apparently no meaning for his presence. Some unaccountable and utterly vague feeling of dislike for this man has been hers ever since she first saw him. He is repugnant to her in a remarkable degree, considering how little he has to do with her life in any way.

"He seems to haunt this part of the house," she says to herself now, uncomfortably. "If I were Fabian I should hate to know there was a chance of meeting him every time I opened my door. Has he, perhaps, a passion for Fabian—or——"

Instinctively she throws an additional touch of hauteur into her shapely head, and without deigning to notice the old man, sweeps by him, her glimmering white skirts making a gentle frou-frou as she goes.

When she has passed, the secretary raises his eyes and watches her departing form, furtively. There is great cunning mixed with malignity and resentment in his glance. He mutters something inaudible, that carries no blessing in its tone, but yet, as though fascinated by her beauty, he stands still and follows each step she takes upon the polished oaken flooring.

As she stops at a particular door, his whole face changes, and satisfied malice takes the place of resentment.

"Even such pride can stoop," he mutters, with a half-drunken chuckle. "And it is I, my fine lady—who can scarce breathe when I am by—that have power to wring your proud heart."

He turns, and shambles onwards towards his own den.

Portia's steps have grown slower as she gets nearer to the door before which Slyme has seen her stop. Her eyes have sought the ground; all along

the floor her image may be seen, lengthened, but clear; almost with every step she seems to tread upon herself. As she reaches the door she hesitates, and then lifts her hand as if with the intention of knocking. But again she pauses, and her hand drops to her side. As if more nervous than she cares to own, she leans against the lintel of the door, as one might, desirous of support.

Then the weakness vanishes; fastening her teeth upon her under lips she rouses herself, and tapping gently but distinctly upon one of the panels, awaits an answer.

Presently she gets it. "Come in," says Fabian's voice, clear, indifferent; and slowly turning the handle she enters the room.

The lamps are alight; a fire is burning in the grate. At the upper table of this room, that is his study, his very *sanctum sanctorum*, Fabian is sitting with some papers and books before him.

At first, being unconscious of who his visitor is, he does not lift his head, but now, seeing her, he rises quickly to his feet and says,

"You!" in accents of the most acute surprise.

She is standing barely inside the door with the little volume pressed closely, almost convulsively, be-

tween her fingers, and for a moment makes him no reply. It is the first time they have ever been alone, since that day when he had injured his arm through the running away of Sir Christopher's mare.

Now, his face, his tone, is so unfriendly that a great fear falls upon her. Is he very angry with her still? Has she sinned past forgiveness? Will he, perhaps, order her to leave the room? She tries to rally her power of resistance against what Fate—relentless, implacable—is preparing for her; but in vain. A terrible fear of him (the man regarding her with such stern eyes) and of herself crushes her. Her heart dies within her; what evil has fallen upon her days, that *once* were happy? and yet—and yet—of what—what exquisite sweetness is this evil formed!

She flushes, first painfully; and then the flush fades, and pallor holds full sway.

"I can do something for you?" asks Fabian, not advancing towards her, not letting even one kindly accent warm his frozen tone, and this when the silence has grown positively unbearable.

"Thank you—no." Her little cold hands are nervously twined around the book she holds. Speech

has cruelly deserted her; a sob has risen in her throat, and she is battling with it so fiercely that for a moment she can say nothing. Then she conquers, and almost piteously she lays the book upon the very edge of the table nearest her, and says with difficulty,

"I brought you this. At breakfast this morning you said you had not read it; and to-night I knew you would be alone, and I thought——it is *The Europeans*—it might help you to while away an hour."

Her voice dies away, and again silence follows it. She is really frightened now. She has met many men, has been the acknowledged beauty of a London season, has had great homage laid at her feet; but no man has had power to make her heart waken, until she met this man, upon whom disgrace lies heavy. It is *Kismet!* She feels cold now, and miserable, and humbled before him who should surely be humbled before her. What has she meant by coming to his room without so much as an invitation; to him—who in her sight is guilty, indeed, of an offence not to be forgiven in her world.

She grows tired and very weary, and the old pain at her heart, that always comes to her when

she is miserable or perplexed, is tormenting her now, making her feel sick of life and dispirited.

"It was kind of you to think of me," says Fabian, coldly; "*too* kind. But there are some matters of importance I must get through to-night, and I fear I shall not have time for fiction."

She takes up the book again, the little instrument that betrays his determination to accept no benefits at her hands, and moves towards the door.

Coming quickly up to her, that he may open the door, he stands between her and it, and stops her.

"As you are here," he says, "let me look at you. Remember, I have never seen you dressed for a ball before."

As if astonished at his request, she stands quite still, and, letting her round, bare arms hang loosely before her, with her hands clasped, she lets him gaze at her sweet fairness in utter silence. It takes him some time. Then—

"You are very pale," he says—no more. Not a word of praise escapes him. She is woman enough to feel chagrin at this, and discontent. Has her glass lied to her, then? One small word of appro-

bation, even about her gown, would have been sweet to her at this moment. *Is* she so very pale? Is it that this white gown does not become her? A quick dislike to the beautiful robe—and only an hour ago she had regarded it with positive affection—now takes possession of her.

"I am always pale," she says, with subdued resentment.

"Not always. To-night one hardly knows where your *dress* ends, and where *you* begin." She has hardly time to wonder if this is a compliment or the other thing, when he goes on again. "I don't think I ever saw you in white before?" he says.

"No, and it is probable you will never see me in it again," she says, petulantly. "I dislike it. It is cold and unbecoming, I think."

"No, not unbecoming."

"Well," she says, impatiently, "not becoming, at least."

"That, of course, is quite a matter of taste," he says, indifferently.

She laughs unpleasantly. To *make* him give a decided opinion upon her appearance has now grown to be a settled purpose with her. She moves her foot impatiently upon the ground, then suddenly

she lifts her eyes to his—the large, sweet, wistful eyes he has learned to know so well, and that now are quick with defiance—and says, obstinately:

"Do *you* think it suits me?"

He pauses. And then a peculiar smile that, somehow, angers her excessively, grows round his lips and lingers there.

"Yes," he answers, slowly; "you are looking admirably—you are looking all you can possibly desire to-night."

She is deeply angered. She turns abruptly aside, and, passing him, goes quickly to the door.

"I beg your pardon," he says, hastily, following her, with a really contrite expression on his face. "Of course I know you did not want me to say that—yet—what was it you did want me to say? You challenged me, you know."

"I am keeping you from your work," says Portia, quietly. "Go back to it. I know I should not have come here to disturb you, and——"

"Do not say that," he interrupts her, eagerly. "I deserve it, I know, but *do not*. I have lost all interest in my work. I cannot return to it to-night. And that book you brought, let me have it now, will you? I shall be glad of it by-and-bye."

Before she can refuse, a sound of footsteps without makes itself known—there is a tinkling as of many bangles, and then the door is thrown wide, and Dulce enters.

She is looking very pretty in a gown of palest azure. There is a brightness, a joyousness, about her that must attract and please the eye; she is, indeed,

> "One not tired with life's long day, but glad
> I' the freshness of its morning."

"I have come to say good night to you, Fabian," she says, regarding her brother with loving, wistful eyes. "I suppose I shan't be able to see you again until to-morrow. Promise me you will go to bed, and to sleep, *soon*."

"That is the very simplest promise one can give," returns he, mockingly. "Why should not one sleep?" Then, seeing the extreme sadness that has settled on her *mignonne* face, that should by right only be glad with smiles, goes on more gently, "Be happy; I shall do all you ask me."

"Ah, Portia, you here, too," says Dulce, smiling gratefully at her. "How sweet you are looking to-

night—and your gown—how perfect. Isn't it lovely, Fabian?"

"Quite lovely," slowly.

"And she herself, too," goes on Dulce, enthusiastically, "isn't *she* lovely as well?"

"Yes," says Fabian, still more slowly.

"She is like a dream of snow, or purity—or something," says Dulce, vaguely, but admiringly.

"Or ice?" says Fabian.

"Oh, *no*, not *ice*. It is too hard, too unsympathetic, too cold."

"They are both cold, are they not?" says Portia, with a very faint smile. "Both ice and snow."

"Dulce, Dulce!" calls somebody, from without.

"Now, who *is* that," says Miss Blount, irritably. "Roger, of *course*. I really never am allowed one moment to myself when he is in the house. He spends his entire time, first calling me, and then quarrelling with me when he finds me. He does it on purpose, I think. He can't bear me to have even one peaceful or happy instant. I never met anyone so utterly provoking as Roger."

She runs to him, nevertheless, and Portia moves as if to follow her.

"Don't leave me in anger," entreats Fabian, in

some agitation, detaining her by a gesture full of entreaty. "Do anything but that. Think of the long hours I shall have to put in here, by myself, with nothing but my own thoughts; and say something kind to me before you go."

"You forget," she says, with slow reproach, her eyes on the ground. "How can you hope for anything—even one word—sympathetic from *ice*. Let me go to Dulce."

"You *shall* not leave me like this," dictates he, desperately, shutting the door with sudden passion, and deliberately placing his back against it. "Am I not sufficiently unhappy that you should seek to make me even more so; to add, indeed, a very crown to my misery. I will not face the long night alone with this fresh grief! The remembrance of your face as it now looks at me, of your eyes, so calm, so unforgiving, would fill the weary hours with madness. *You* don't know what it is to endure the pangs of Tantalus, to have a perpetual hunger at your heart that can never be satisfied. *I* do. I have suffered enough. You must be friends with me before you go."

"I came to make friends with you. I wanted to be friends with you, and——"

"Yes, I know. I received you ungraciously; I grant it; but was there nothing for *me* to forgive? And even if I was unpardonably ungrateful for your kindness, is that so heavy a crime that I should be punished for it with what is worse than death? Portia, I entreat you, once again, put your hand in mine before you leave me."

He is very pale, and there is a very agony of expectation in his dark eyes. But yet she stands irresolute, not seeing his agony, because her head is bent, with her fair arms still hanging before her, with her fingers closely intertwined.

He can look unrebuked upon her beauty, upon the rounded whiteness of her arms, upon the tumultuous rise and fall of her bosom, upon the little shapely, perfect head, that might well have graced a throne.

Each rich charm in her lovely downcast face is clear to him; a great yearning takes possession of his breast, an unconquerable desire to tell her all he feels for her. There have been moments when he has thought he *must* fall at her feet, and laying hold of the hem of her garment, cry aloud to her from out his heart's wild longing, "I have gone mad! I love you! Let me die!"

This is such a moment. Oh! to be able to take her in his arms for even one brief instant, and hold her close to his breaking heart—this silent girl, with her pride, and her beauty, and her cruel tenderness.

He sighs heavily, and turns his head away. Still no word escapes her. She might almost be cut in marble, so quiet, so motionless she stands. Is she indifferent to his pain; or careless of it—or only ignorant?

"Go, then," he says, without looking at her, in a voice from which all warmth and feeling of any sort, be it anger or regret, has flown. "There is no reason at all why you should waste even one kind word or touch upon me. I was mad to ask it."

At this, life returns to her. Her lips quiver; she lifts her eyes to his, and such is the force of her regard that he is constrained, sorely against his will, to return it. Then he can see her eyes are full of tears—great liquid loving drops that tremble to their fall; and even as he watches them, in painful wonder, they part from her lids and run all down her pale but rounded cheeks.

She holds out to him, not one, but *two* hands.

His whole face changes; a gladness, that has in it something of heaven, fills his eyes.

Taking the little trembling hands softly in his own, he lays them on his beating heart.

For a moment only, then he lets them fall; and then, before this divine joy has quite left him, he finds himself, once more, alone.

CHAPTER XIV.

"What sudden anger's this? How have I reaped it? He parted frowning from me, as if ruin leaped from his eyes."

SHAKESPEARE.

THE night wears on. By this time everybody is either pleased or disappointed with the evening. For the most part, of course, they looked pleased, because frowns are unbecoming; but, then, looks go for so little.

Julia, who has impounded a middle-aged baronet, is radiant. The middle-aged baronet is not! He evidently regards Julia as a sort of modern albatross, that hangs heavily to his neck, and withers beneath her touch. She has been telling him all about her early life in India, and her troubles, and the way she suffered with her servants, and various other private matters; and the poor baronet doesn't seem to see it, and is very fatigued indeed. But Julia has him fast, and so there is little hope for him.

Dulce and Roger have been at open war ever since the second dance. From their eyes, when di-

rected at each other, have darted forked lightning since that fatal dance.

"If they could only have been kept apart for 'this night only,'" says Sir Mark, in despair, "all might have been well; but the gods ordained otherwise."

Perhaps the careless gods had Stephen Gower's case in consideration; at all events, that calm young man, profiting by the dispute between the betrothed pair, has been making decided, if smothered, love to Dulce, all the evening.

By this time, indeed, the whole room has noticed his infatuation, and covert remarks about the probability of her carrying on to a successful finish her first engagement are whispered here and there.

Sir Christopher is looking grave and anxious. Some kind friend has been making him as uncomfortable about Dulce's future as circumstances will permit.

Meanwhile, Dulce herself, with a bright flush upon her cheeks and a light born of defiance in her blue-green eyes, is dancing gaily with Stephen, and is looking charming enough to draw all eyes upon her.

Dicky Browne, of course, is in his element. He is dancing with everybody, talking to everybody, flirting with everybody and is, as he himself declares, "as jolly as a sand boy." He is making love indiscriminately all round—with old maids and young—married and single—with the most touching impartiality.

"Dicky is like the bee amongst the flowerets. By Jove, if he improves the shining hours, he ought to make a good match yet," says Dicky's papa, who has condescended to forsake his club for one night, and grace Dulce's ball with his somewhat attenuated charms.

As the above speech will prove, Mr. Browne senior's knowledge of Watts and Tommy Moore is limited and decidedly mixed.

Amongst all the fair women assembled at the Hall to-night, to Portia, beyond dispute, must the golden apple be awarded. She is still pale, but exceedingly beautiful. The wistful, tired expression that darkens her eyes only serves to heighten her loveliness, and throw out the delicate tinting of her fair skin. Dulce, noticing her extreme pallor, goes up to her, and whispers gently:

"You are tired, darling. Do not dance any more, unless you wish it."

"I am not sure I *don't* wish it; I don't exactly know what it is I *do* wish," says Portia, with a rather broken smile. "I daresay, like most other things in this life, I shall find out all about it when it is too late. But finish your waltz, dearest, and don't puzzle your brain about me."

All the windows are thrown wide open. Outside the heavens are alight with stars. The air is heavy with the breath of dying flowers, and the music—faint and low at times, and again wild and sweet—rises and swells as the director waves to and fro his magic wand.

Inside, in the conservatories, the lamps are burning low; the tender blossoms are hanging down their heads. Between the dark green branches of the shrubs lights blue and red and yellow gleam softly. In the distance may be heard the plaintive drip-drip of many fountains.

Roger, passing through one of the halls, and seeing Dulce and Mr. Gower standing before a huge Chelsea bowl of flowers, stops short, hesitates, and then, *bon gré mal gré*, goes up to them and makes

some trivial remark that neither deserves an answer nor gets one.

Dulce is apparently wrapped up in the contemplation of a flower she has taken from the old bowl—that looks something like an indoor Marguerite; she is plucking it slowly to pieces, and as she so mutilates it, whispers softly the incantation that will help to declare her fortune:

"Il m'aime—un peu—beaucoup—passionnément—pas du tout. Il m'aime—un peu———"

The petals are all gone; nothing remains but the very heart of the poor flower, which now, as she breaks it mercilessly in two, flutters sadly to her feet, and dies there.

"Yes—just so," she says, with a little hostile glance at Roger, distinctly seen by Gower—"and such a very little, that it need hardly count!"

"What an unsatisfactory lover," says Roger, rather satirically, returning her glance with interest. "Of whom were you thinking?"

"My dear Roger, you forget," says Miss Blount, with admirable promptitude; "how could I think of anyone in that light! I have never had a lover in my life. I have only had—*you!*" She says this

slowly, and lets her lids fall half over her eyes that are now gleaming with an undue brilliancy.

"True!" replies Dare, with maddening concurrence, stroking his moustache softly.

"*Isn't* Roger charming," says Dulce (her own manner deeply aggravating in its turn), tapping Gower's arm lightly and confidentially with her fan; "*so* honest and withal *so* gracious."

"A compliment from you is indeed worth having," says Roger, who is in a dreadful temper; "but a truce to them now. By-the-bye, were you really thinking of me just now when you plucked that unoffending flower to pieces? I can hardly bring myself to believe it."

"If not of you, of whom should I be thinking?" retorts she, calmly but defiantly.

"Well—Gower, for example," says Roger with a sneering laugh, and unpardonable bad taste. "*He* looks as though he could do a lover's part at a moment's notice, and without the slightest effort."

As he makes this objectionable little speech, he turns on his heel and leaves them.

Dulce, crimson, and with her breath coming somewhat quickly, still lets her eyes meet Gower's bravely,

"I must ask you to excuse my cousin," she says, quietly. "How warm the rooms are; is there no air anywhere, I wonder?"

"On the balcony there is," says Gower, gently. "Shall we go there for a minute or two?"

She lays her hand upon his arm, and goes with him through the lighted, heavily-perfumed rooms on to the balcony, where the cool air is blowing, and where the fresh scent from the waving pines makes itself felt.

The moon is sailing in all its grandeur overhead. Below, the world is white with its glory. The music of many rivulets, as they rush sleepless to the river, sounds sweeter far than even the strains of the band within.

It is past midnight. The stars are growing pale. Already the "world's heart" begins to throb,

> "And a wind blows,
> With unknown freshness, over lands and seas."

Something in the silence and majesty of the hour, and something, perhaps, within her own heart, brings the unbidden tears to Dulce's eyes.

"What can be the matter with Roger?" asks

Stephen, presently, in a low tone. "We used to be such good friends, long ago. I never saw anyone so changed. He *used* to be a genial sort of fellow." The emphasis is very expressive.

"Used he?" says Dulce in a somewhat expressionless tone.

"Yes; a right down good sort."

"Is he so very bad now?" says Dulce, deliberately and dishonestly ignorant.

"To you—yes."

There is a pause.

"I think I hardly understand you," she says, in a tone that should have warned him to be silent.

"Have you forgotten the scene of a moment since?" he asks her, eagerly; "his voice, his glance, his whole manner was unbearable; you bore it like an angel—but—why should you bear *anything?* Why should you trouble yourself about him at all? Why not show that you care as little for him as he cares for——"

"Go on," says Dulce, imperiously.

"As he cares for *you*, then," says Stephen, recklessly.

"You have been studying us to some purpose, evidently," exclaims Dulce, turning to him with extreme bitterness. "I suppose, indeed, you are not alone in your judgment. I daresay it is apparent to the whole world that I am a matter of perfect indifference to—to—my cousin!"

"'Who runs may read,'" says Stephen with quiet determination. "Why should I lie to you? He must be blind and deaf, I think—it is not to be accounted for in any other way. Why that other morning in the garden, you remember how he then——"

"I remember nothing," interrupts she, haughtily, turning away from him, deep offence in her eyes.

But he follows her.

"Now you are angry with me," he says, miserably, trying to look into her averted face.

"Why should I be angry?" she says, petulantly. Is it because you tell me Roger does not care for me? Do you think I did not know that before? It is, indeed, a question with me whether I am or am not an object of aversion to the man I have promised to marry."

"You speak very hardly," he says.

"I speak what is in my heart," says Dulce, tremulously.

"Nevertheless, I should not have said what I did," says Stephen, remorsefully, "I know that. Whatever I might have thought, I should have kept it to myself; but"—in a low tone—"it maddens me to see you give yourself voluntarily to one incapable of appreciating the treasure that has fallen to his share—a treasure beyond price—when there are others who, for a word, a glance, a smile, would barter——"

He pauses. His voice is trembling. His eyes are bent upon the ground as though he is half afraid to meet her glance. There is genuine feeling in his tone.

Dulce, impressed by his open agitation, in spite of herself, leans over the balcony, and lets her fingers wander nervously amongst the leaves of the Virginian creeper that has intertwined itself in the ironwork, and is now fluttering within her reach. It is gleaming blood-red beneath the kiss of the fickle moonbeams, that dance hither and thither amidst its crimson foliage.

Plucking two or three of the reddest leaves, she

trifles with them gently, and concentrating all her attention on them, gives herself an excuse for avoiding Stephen's earnest gaze. Her hands are unsteady. She is affected by the sincerity of his manner; and just now, too, she is feeling hurt and wounded, and, perhaps, a little reckless. Her self-pride (that dearest possession of a woman) has sustained a severe shock; for the first time she has been awakened to the fact that the whole country considers her as nought in the eyes of the man whose wife she has promised to be.

To prove to the country that she is as indifferent to Roger as he (it appears) is to her becomes a settled desire within her heart; the more she dwells upon this, the more sweet it seems to her that there should be another man willing to be her slave; another in whose sight she is all that a woman should be, and to whom each tone of her voice, each glance of her soft eyes, is as a touch of heaven!

Her silence emboldening Gower, he bends over her, and lays his hand upon the slender fingers that are still holding the scarlet leaves of the Virginian creeper.

"Do you understand me?" he asks, nervously.

"Yes."

She feels almost constrained to answer him honestly, so compelling is the extreme earnestness of his manner.

"It seems a paltry thing now to say that I love you," goes on Gower in an impassioned tone that carries her away with it, now that she is sore at heart; "You *know* that. You have known it for weeks." He puts aside with a gesture her feeble attempt at contradiction. "Every thought of my heart is yours; I live only in the hope that soon I shall see you again. Tell me now honestly, would it be possible to break off this engagement with your cousin?"

At this she shrinks a little from him and a distressed look comes into her beautiful eyes.

"What are you saying?" she says, in a half frightened way. "It has been going on for so long, this engagement—*always*, as it seems to me. How should I break it off? And then there is uncle Christopher, he would be unhappy; he would not forgive, and—besides——"

Her voice dies away. Memory, vague but sharp, comes to her. If she should now deliberately dis-

card Roger, how will it be with her in the future? And yet what if he should be glad of his freedom; should welcome it with open arms? If, indeed, he should be only waiting for her to take the initiative, and give him his release!

This reflection carries its sting; there is madness in it. She closes her lips firmly, and her breath comes quickly and uncertainly.

"It will be better for you later on," breaks in Gower, tempting her, surely but quietly. "When you are married—it is all very well for you now, when escape at any moment is possible; but when you are irrevocably bound to an unloving husband how will it be with you? Other women have tried it, and how has it ended with them? Not as it will with you, I know; you are far above the many; but still your life will drag with you—there will be no joy! no sympathy! no——Dulce, have pity on yourself (I do not say on *me*), and save yourself while you can."

She makes a last faint protest.

"How do you *know* he does not love me?" she asks, painfully. "How can you be sure?—and at least"—wistfully—"we are accustomed to each other,

we have known each other all our lives, and we have quarrelled *so* hard already that we can scarcely do anything more—the worst with us is over."

"It will be different then," says Gower—he is speaking from his heart in all honesty. "Now you belong to him only in an impalpable fashion; then——"

"It is your belief that he does not love me at all?" interrupts she, tapping her foot impatiently upon the ground.

"It is my belief," returns he, slowly.

Almost as he speaks, some one steps from the lighted room beyond on to the balcony and approaches them. It is Roger.

"This is ours, I think," he says, addressing Dulce, and alluding to the waltz just commencing.

"Is it—what a pity; I had quite forgotten," she says, wilfully. "I am afraid I have half promised it to Mr. Gower, and you know *he* dances charmingly."

The emphasis is not to be mistaken. The remark, of course, is meant alone for Roger, and he alone hears it. Gower has gone away from them a

yard or two and is buried in thought. As Roger dances divinely her remark is most uncalled for and vexes him more than he would care to confess.

"Don't let me interfere with you and your new friend," he says, lifting his brows. "If you want to dance all night with Gower, by all means do it; there is really no earthly reason why you shouldn't."

Here, as his own name falls upon his ears, Gower turns and looks at Roger expectantly.

"I absolve you willingly from your engagement to me," goes on Roger, his eyes fixed upon his wilful cousin, his face cold and hard. The extreme calmness of his tone misleads her. Her lips tighten. A light born of passionate anger darkens her grey eyes.

"Do you?" she says, a peculiar meaning in her tone.

"From this engagement only," returns he, hastily.

"Thank you. Of your own free will, then, you resign me, and give me permission to dance with whom I will."

The warm blood is flaming in her cheeks. He has thrown her over very willingly. He is evidently

glad to escape the impending waltz. How shall she be avenged for this indignity?"

"Mr. Gower," she says, turning prettily to Stephen, "will you get me out of my difficulty? and will you dance this waltz with me? You see," with a brave effort to suppress some emotion that is threatening to overpower her, "I have to throw myself upon your mercy."

"You confer a very great honour upon me," says Gower, gently. The courtesy of his manner is such a contrast to Roger's ill-temper, that the latter loses the last grain of self control he possesses. There is, too, a little smile of conscious malice upon Gower's lips that grows even stronger as his eyes rest upon the darkened countenance of his whilom friend. The whilom friend, seeing it, lets wrath burn even fiercer within his breast.

"You are not engaged to any one else?" says Dulce, sweetly, forgetting how a moment since she had told Roger she had half promised Gower the dance in question.

"Even if I was, I am at *your* service now and always," says Gower.

"As my dancing displeases you so excessively," says Roger, slowly, "it seems a shame to condemn

you to keep the rest of your engagements with me. I think I have my name down upon your card for two more waltzes. Forget that, and give them to Gower, or any one else that suits you. For my part, I do not care to——" he checks himself too late.

"Go on," says Dulce, coldly, in an ominously calm fashion. "You had more to say, surely; you do not care to dance them with *me* you meant to say. Isn't it?"

"You can think as you wish, of course."

"All the world is free to do that. Then I may blot your name from my card for the rest of the evening?"

"Certainly."

"If those dances are free, Miss Blount, may I ask you for them," says Stephen, pleasantly.

"You can have them with pleasure," replies she, smiling kindly at him.

"Don't stay too long in the night air, Dulce," says Roger, with the utmost unconcern, turning to go indoors again. This is the unkindest cut of all. If he had gone away angry, silent, revengeful, she might perhaps have forgiven him, but this careful remembrance of her, this calm, and utterly indif-

ferent concern for her comfort fills her with vehement anger.

The blood forsakes her lips, and her eyes grow bright with passionate tears.

"Why do you take things so much to heart," says Stephen, in a low voice. "Do you care so greatly then about an unpleasant speech from him? I should have thought you might have grown accustomed to his *brusquerie* by this."

"He wasn't brusque just now," says Dulce. "He was very kind, was he not? Careful about my catching cold, and that."

"*Very*," says Gower, significantly. "Yet there are tears in your eyes. What a baby you are."

"No, I am not," says Dulce, mournfully. "A baby is an adorable thing, and I am very far from being that."

"If babies are to be measured by their adorableness, I should say you are the very biggest baby I ever saw," declares Mr. Gower, with such an amount of settled conviction in his tone that Dulce, in spite of the mortification that is still rankling in her breast, laughs aloud. Delighted with his success, Gower laughs too, and taking her hand draws it within his arm.

"Come, do not let us forget Roger gave you to me for this dance," he says. "If only for that act of grace, I forgive him all his misdeeds." With a last lingering glance at the beauty of the night, together they return to the ball room.

CHAPTER XV.

"I would that I were low laid in my grave."
KING JOHN.

"Proteus, I love thee in my heart of hearts."
TWO GENTLEMEN OF VERONA.

THE last guest has departed. Portia has wished "good-night" to a very sleepy Dulce, and has gone upstairs to her own room. In the corridor where she sleeps, Fabian sleeps too, and as she passes his door lightly and on tiptoe, she finds that his door is half open, and, hesitating, wonders with a quick pang at her heart why this should be the case.

Summoning courage she advances softly over his threshold, and then sees that the bed within is unoccupied, that to-night at least its master is unknown to it.

A shade darkens her face; stepping back on to the corridor she thinks deeply for a moment, and then, laying her candle on a bracket near, she goes noiselessly down the stairs again, across the silent halls, and, opening the hall door, steps out into the coming dawn.

Over the gravel, over the grass, through the quiet pleasaunce she goes unswervingly, past the dark green laurels into the flower garden, and close to the murmuring streamlet to where a little patch of moss-grown sward can be seen surrounded by aged elms.

Here she finds him!

He is asleep! He is lying on his back, with his arms behind his tired head, and his beautiful face uplifted to the heavens. Upon his long dark lashes lie signs of bitter tears.

Who shall tell what thoughts had been his, before kind sleep fell upon his lids and drove him into soothing slumber.

> "The sweetest joy, the wildest woe, is love;
> The taint of earth, the odour of the skies
> Is in it."

So sings Bailey. More of wild woe than joy must have been in Fabian's heart before oblivion came to him. Was he thinking of her—of Portia? For many days his heart has been "darkened with her shadow," and to-night—when all his world was abroad, and he alone was excluded from prostrating himself at her shrine—terrible despair had come to lodge with him, and grief, and passionate protest.

Stooping over him, Portia gazes on him long and earnestly, and then, as no dew lies upon the grass, she sits down beside him, and taking her knees into her embrace, stays there silent but close to him, her eyes fixed upon the "patient stars," that are at last growing pale with thought of the coming morn.

The whole scene is full of fantastic beauty—the dawning day; the man lying full length upon the soft green moss in an attitude suggestive of death; the girl, calm, passionless, clad in her white clinging gown, with her arms crossed, and her pale, upturned face beautiful as the dawn itself.

The light is breaking through the skies; the stars are dying out one by one. On the crest of the hill, and through the giant firs, soft beams are coming; and young Apollo, leaping into life, sends out a crimson ray from the far east.

Below, the ocean is at rest—wrapt in sullen sleep. "The singing of the soft blue waves is hushed, or heard no more." And no sound comes to disturb the unearthly solemnity of the hour. Only a little breeze comes from the south, soft and gentle, and full of tenderest love that is as the

"Kiss of morn, waking the lands."

He stirs! His eyes open. He turns restlessly, and then a waking dream is his. But is it a dream? He is looking into Portia's eyes, and she—she does not turn from him, but in a calm, curious fashion returns his gaze, as one might to whom hope and passion are as things forgotten.

No word escapes him. He does not even change his position, but lies, looking up at her in silent wonder. Presently he lifts his hand, and slowly covers with it one of hers lying on the grass near his head.

She does not draw it away—everything seems forgotten—there is only for her at this moment the pale dawn, and the sweet calm, and the solitude and the love so fraught with pain that overfills her soul!

He draws her hand nearer to him—still nearer—until her bare soft arm (chilled by the early day), is lying upon his lips. There he lets it rest, as though he would fain drink into his thirsty heart all the tender sweetness of it.

And *yet* she says nothing, only sits silent there beside him, her other arm resting on her knees, and her eyes fixed immovably on his.

Oh! the rapture and the agony of the moment—

a rapture that will never come again, an agony that must be theirs for ever.

"My life! my love!" he murmurs at last, the words passing his lips as if they were one faint sigh, but yet not so faint but she may hear them.

She sighs, too; and a smile, fine and delicate, parts her lips, and into her eyes comes a strange fond gleam, born of passion and nearness and the sweetness of loving and living.

The day is deepening. More rosy grows the sky, more fragrant the early breeze. Her love is at her feet, her arm upon his lips; and on the fair naked arm his breath is coming and going quickly, unevenly—the feel of it makes glad her very soul!

Then comes the struggle. Oh! the sweetness, the perfectness of life if spent alone with the beloved. To sacrifice all things—to go away to some far distant spot with *him*—to know each opening hour will be their very own: they two, with all the world forgotten and well lost—what bliss could equal it?

Her arm trembles in his embrace; almost she turns to give herself into his keeping for ever, when a sound, breaking the great stillness, changes the face of all things.

Was it a twig snapping, or the rush of the brooklet beyond? or the clear first notes of an awakening bird? She never knows. But all at once remembrance returns to her, and knowledge and wisdom is with her again.

To live with a stained life, however dear; to feel his shame day by day; to distrust a later action because of a former one; to draw miserable and degrading conclusions from a sin gone by. *No!*

Her lips quiver. Her heart dies within her. She turns her eyes to the fast reddening sky, and, with her gaze thus fixed on Heaven, registers an oath.

"As she may not marry him whom she loves, never will she be wife to living man!"

And this is her comfort and her curse, that in her heart, until her dying day will nestle her sullied love. Hidden away and wept over in secret, and lamented bitterly at times, but dearer far, for all that, than anything the earth can offer.

Gently — very gently — without looking at him, she draws her arm from his touch and rises to her feet. He, too, rises, and stands before her silently as one might who awaits his doom.

"To hear with eyes belongs to Love's rare wit." *He* seems to know all that is now passing in her

soul, her weakness—her longing—her love—her strength—her oath—her grief; it is all laid bare to him.

And she herself; she is standing before him, her rich satin gown trailing on the green grass, her face pale, her eyes large and mournful. Her soft white neck gleams like snow in the growing light; upon it the strings of pearls rise and fall tumultuously. How strange—how white she seems—like a vision from fairie, or dreamland. Shall he ever forget it?

Laying his hand upon her shoulders, he looks steadily into her eyes; and then, after a long pause—

"There should be proof," he says, sadly.

And she says,

"Yes, there should be proof," in a tone from which all feeling, and hope, and happiness have fled.

And yet the world grows brighter. The early morn springs forth and glads the air.

> "But, nor Orient morn,
> Nor fragrant zephyr, nor Arabian climes,
> Nor gilded ceilings, can relieve the soul
> Pining in thraldom."

A long pause follows her sentence, that to him has savoured of death. Then he speaks:

"Let me raise your gown," he says, with heart-broken gentleness, "the dew of morning is on the grass."

He lifts her train as he says this, and lays it across the bare and lovely arm that had been his for some blessed minutes. As he sees it, and remembers everything—all that *might* have been, and all that *has* been, and all that *is*—a dry sob chokes his voice, and stooping, he presses his lips passionately to her smooth, cool flesh.

At this she bursts into bitter weeping; and, letting her glimmering white gown fall once again in its straight, cold folds around her, gives way to uncontrollable sorrow.

"Must there be grief for you, too, my own sweetheart?" says Fabian; and then he lays his arms around her and draws her to him, and holds her close to his heart, until her sobs die away through pure exhaustion. But he never bends his head to hers, or seeks to press his lips to those—that are sweet and dear beyond expression—but that never can be his. Even at this supreme moment he strives to spare her a passing pang.

"Were she to kiss me now," he tells himself, "out of the depths of her heart, when the cold pas-

sionless morning came to her she would regret it," and so he refrains from the embrace he would have sold his best to gain.

"I wish there might be death, *soon*," says Portia, and then she looks upon the awakening land so full of beauty, and growing light, and promise of all good.

The great sun, climbing up aloft, strikes upon her gaze, and the swaying trees, and the music of all things that live comes to her ears, and with them all comes, too, a terrible sense of desolation, that overwhelms her.

"How can the world be so fair," she says. "How can it smile, and grow, and brighten into life, when there is no life—for——"

She breaks down.

"For us," he finishes for her, slowly; and there is great joy in the blending of her name with his. "Yes, I know; it is what you would have said. Forgive me, my best beloved; but I am glad, in the thought, that we grieve together."

His tone is full of sadness, a sadness without hope. They are standing hand in hand, and are looking into each other's eyes.

"It is for the last time," she says, in a broken voice.

And he says,

"Yes, for the very last time."

He never tries to combat her resolution—to slay the foe that is desolating his life and hers. He submits to cruel fate without a murmur.

"Put your face to mine," she says, *so* faintly, that he can hardly hear her; and then once more he holds her in his arms, and presses her against his heart.

How long she lies there neither of them ever knows; but presently, with a sigh, she comes back to the sad present, and lifts her head, and looks mournfully upon the quiet earth.

And even as she looks the day breaks at last with a rush, and the red sunshine, coming up from the unknown, floods all the world with beauty.

END OF VOL. I.